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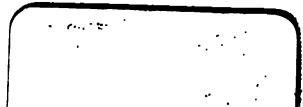
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PROPER PRIDE.

A Novel.

Life may change, but it may fly not ;
Hope may vanish, but can die not ;
Truth be veiled, but still it burneth,
Love repulsed—but it returneth.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON :
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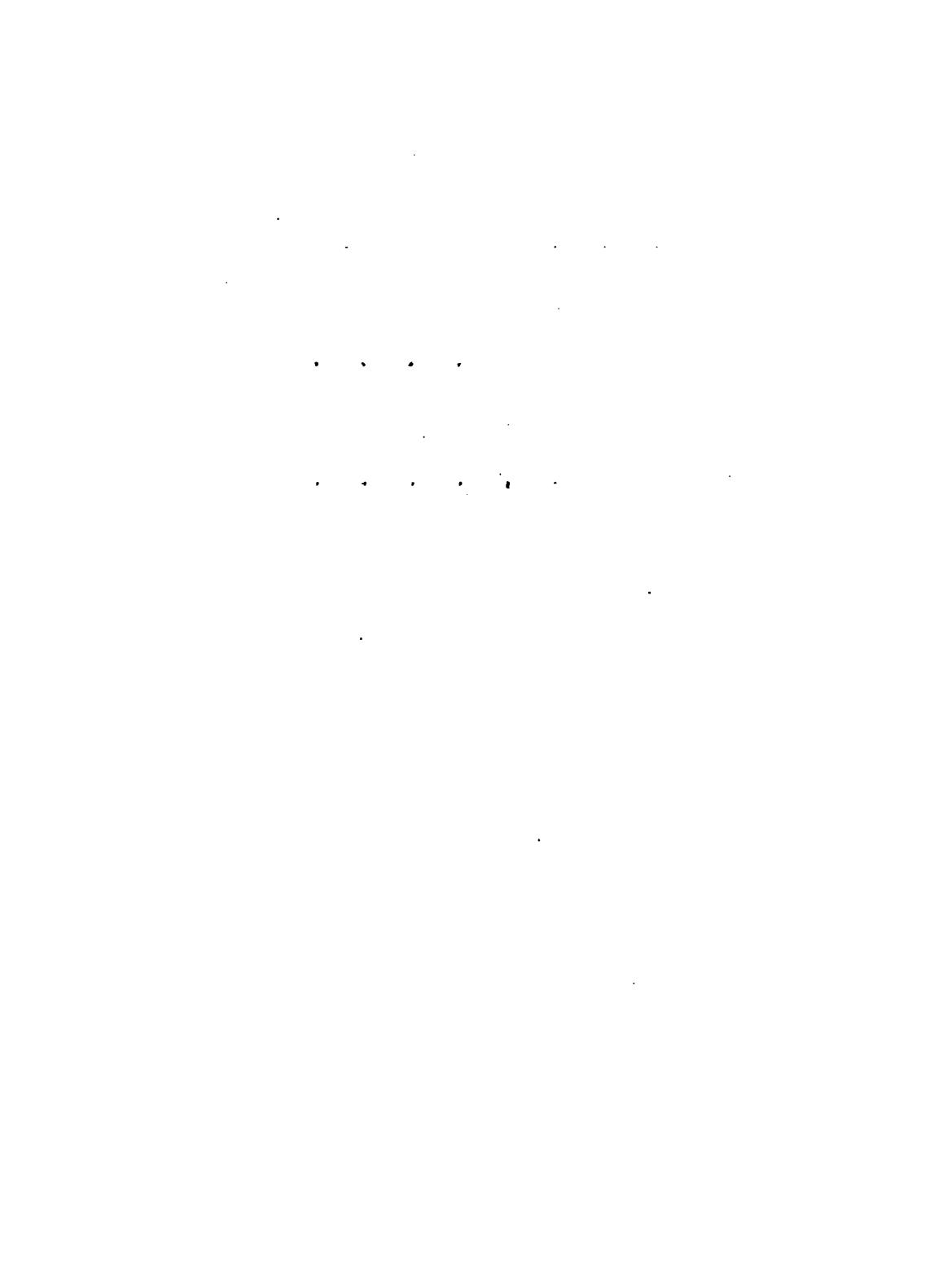
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PROPER PRIDE.

CHAPTER I.

MALTA.

DECEMBER in Malta is very different from that month in England. There is no snow, no black frost, no fog; a bright, turquoise-blue sky, and deep indigo sea, smooth as glass, and dotted here and there with the white sails of fishing-boats, make a becoming background for this buff-coloured island. The air is soft, yet exhilarating; a perfume of oranges, cheroots, and flowers pervades the atmosphere. Little boys, with superb dark eyes, are

thrusting delicious bunches of roses and heliotrope into the hands of passers-by, and demanding “sixpence.” The new piano-organs are grinding away mercilessly at the corner of every street. A trooper, a Peninsular and Oriental, and a vicious-looking ironclad are all in simultaneously, and Valetta is crammed. Such, at least, was the scene one December afternoon, not many years ago. It was the fashionable hour; the Strada Reale was full of shoppers, sightseers, and loungers; half the garrison were strolling up and down. Fat monks in brown, thin nuns in black, fruitsellers, Maltese women in their picturesque faldettas, soldiers, sailors, rich men, poor men, beggar men, and no doubt thieves, thronged the hot white pavement.

Outside Marîche’s, the well-known tobacconist, two young men, bearing the

unmistakable stamp of the British warrior of the period, were smoking the inevitable weed.

Cox, "the horsey," with hands in pockets, was holding forth at intervals, to Brown, "the *blasé*," and ladies' man *par excellence*, of the gallant smashers.

"Never saw such a hole as this is in my life—*never!* No hunting, no shooting, no sport of any kind. Think of all the tip-top runs they are having at home now! If *The Field* is to be believed, there never was such going; nor, for the matter of that, such grief. Here we are—stuck on an island; water wherever you look; not a horse worth twenty pounds in the place!"

"Oh come, my dear fellow," remonstrated his friend, "what about the Colonel's barb, and half-a-dozen others I could mention?"

"Well, not a *hunter*, at any rate, and that's all the same. If we are left here another year, I believe I shall cut my throat—or get *married*."

Looking at his companion with critical gravity, to see how he took this tremendous alternative, but observing no wonderful expression of alarm or anxiety depicted on his face, he continued to puff furiously at the cigar, which he held almost savagely between his set teeth. Suddenly he exclaimed :

"By Jove, there's that Miss Saville that all the fellows are talking about! Why she's nothing but a schoolgirl after all."

"Nevertheless, she is the prettiest girl in Valetta," replied Mr. Brown, taking his cheroot out of his mouth and gazing with an air of languid approval after a tall slight figure, in a well-cut blue

serge costume, that, in company with an elderly lady, was crossing the Palace Square.

"By the way, Brown, who *is* this Miss Saville when she is at home?"

"Miss Saville," replied Brown, propping himself against the doorway, and evidently preparing for a narrative, "is—— In the first place, an heiress, four thousand a-year, my dear boy—think of that."

Encouraged by a nod from Cox, he proceeded:

"She is also an orphan."

"Good!" quoth Cox emphatically.

"But you need not run away with the idea that she is an unprotected female. She has a guardian," continued his friend impressively.

"It seems that her father, General Saville, saved or made a lot of money out

in India, and this girl was his only child. Her mother died when she was a baby, and she was sent home and received a first-class education, including *all* the extras. Are you listening?"

"Of course I am; get on with the story."

"Well, old Saville, who had always meant to come home and live on his fortune and repose on his laurels, trusted too long to the climate, and left his bones in the cemetery at Lahore, and his daughter to his great chum, Sir Greville Fairfax, with her fortune and her hand, both tightly tied up, not to marry without his full consent, not to come of age till she was five-and-twenty, and all that sort of thing, you know."

"Yes, yes; go on."

"Hurry no man's cattle, the day is young," said Brown, removing his cheroot

after two or three puffs, and contemplating it with apparent interest.

"About six months later," he proceeded oracularly, "Sir Greville died suddenly of heart disease, and it was found by his will that he had passed on the guardianship of the fair Alice to his son—to his *son*, a young fellow of four-and-twenty, a captain in the Fifth Hussars, and now with his regiment in India. What do you think of that?"

"Think!" returned his friend, with emphasis; "I think it was meant as an uncommonly strong hint for the son to marry her."

"And so he will, be sure. A pretty girl, with four thousand pounds a-year and no relations, is not to be had every day. I only wish I had such a chance But I am afraid that a sub in a marching regiment, with a pittance of a hundred

pounds a year and his pay, would be rather out of the running."

"You may say so," replied Cox candidly, plunging his hands still deeper into his pockets. "That old dowager would make short work of 'the likes of you,' as they say in the Green Isle."

"No doubt she would. She is a Miss Fane, an aunt of Fairfax's, and has been all autumn at Nice; and is now here on a visit to the Lee-Dormers. Of course she will keep the fair Alice for her nephew."

"How do you know all this? How do you know her name is Alice?" inquired Captain Cox.

"Oh, I know a good many things," returned his friend, with careless complacency, resuming his cheroot and a critical inspection of all passers-by.

His companion gazed at him for some

moments with a kind of sleepy admiration, and then suddenly burst out :

“Is this Fairfax a dark, slim, good-looking fellow? for I recollect a Fairfax, an A1 rider, winning the Grand Military at Punchestown some three years ago; he was in the cavalry, I know.”

“Yes, that’s he — Reginald Fairfax. Since then he has been improving the shining hour in the gorgeous East, tiger-shooting, pig-sticking, polo-playing, and so on. His regiment is in this season’s reliefs, and, very likely, on its way home now.”

“But the Fairfax I knew had lots of coin, never went near a lady, and would be the last man in the world to settle down and get married. He cared for nothing but sport of all kinds—hunting, racing, shooting, and so on; and if he is the identical guardian, Miss Saville is

likely to remain Miss Saville as far as he is concerned. Money would be no temptation to him," he concluded triumphantly.

"Well," rejoined Mr. Brown, "if he won't marry her, someone else will; it will be all the same to you and me. Here, my cheroot is out; come along and take a turn in the Strada, and give the natives a treat." *Exeunt, arm-in-arm.*

CHAPTER II.

ALICE SAVILLE.

AMONG the passengers who landed at Southampton from the Peninsular and Oriental *Rosetta*, one warm August afternoon in the year 1858, was a stout well-to-do Bengali ayah. Her stoutness spoke for itself, her gold nose-jewel, heavy seed-pearl earrings, massive necklet, bangles, and toe-rings amply vouched for her monetary ease. She carried on one arm a thick black-and-red plaid shawl (her own property), and on the other a pale, fragile, wistful-looking infant, dressed in

a short white embroidered pelisse, white bonnet, and enormous black sash.

This miserable puny little orphan had lived and thriven, and developed into the beauty and heiress alluded to by Captains Brown and Cox.

All through her early childhood she had been the care, no less than the idol, of her grand aunt and uncle Saville, an old maid and an old bachelor, who resided in an imposing but slightly dilapidated mansion in the centre of a large wild-looking demesne, near some unpronounceable village in the south of Ireland.

Here, for nearly ten years, little Alice—thanks to a supposed delicate constitution—was allowed unlimited freedom from lessons, lectures, punishments, and all the restraints that young people of her years specially detest. It was true that her

fond aunt made a valiant attempt to “do lessons” with her for one hour daily; but how often was that hour curtailed in deference to the pleading of a jovial, indulgent old grand-uncle?

Allowed her own way almost entirely, she brooked no constraint; for she had a fine spirit, as her relations complacently remarked. Her violent bursts of passion were passed by unchecked. It was merely the Saville temper, as much hereditary, and seemingly as much to be proud of, as her violet eyes and the far-famed Saville nose. Mounted on her chestnut pony she would accompany her uncle in his rides or scour solus round the fields, with her long golden hair streaming in the wind, looking far more like a spirit than an ordinary Christian child.

“Ay, but isn’t she the beautiful fair creature to be born in that black country?”

the servants and retainers would observe to each other, with mingled admiration and amazement.

At ten years of age Alice Saville could barely read ; wrote large intoxicated-looking round-hand ; knew nought of arithmetic, sewing, or spelling ; and was, without doubt, as pretty and complete a little dunce as could be found in the whole province of Munster.

Nevertheless, she had *some* accomplishments. She was a wonderful rider for her years, and could and would ride any colt on the premises ; gaily careering round and round the lawn, and sticking on as if she were part and parcel of the animal, to the pride and delight of all beholders. Moreover, she could jabber Irish, and was well versed in all the old lore, legends, fairy-tales, and superstitions current within the four adjoining counties.

Alice had ten years of boundless liberty, and at the end of that time her uncle died, his estate passed to the next heir, and his sister, finding herself no longer the mistress of a large liberally-kept establishment, but, on the contrary, an old maid in straitened circumstances, removed to a small house in the suburbs of Dublin, and talked of sending her niece to school.

Alarming rumours now began to reach Sir Greville Fairfax. His ward was an unkempt, uneducated, bare-legged little wretch, running wild among the bogs of Ireland. What a terrible picture was conjured up before his mental vision. He became at once alive to a sense of his responsibilities, and sought the advice of his most immediate matronly neighbours without a day's delay.

“She must be sent abroad!” this was

the universal opinion, that rather disappointed her guardian ; for, to tell the truth, he had had hopes of keeping her under his own roof, with a governess to look after her manners and education. Since his son had gone to Sandhurst the house seemed remarkably lonely and silent, and he would have liked the child of his old friend Maurice Saville to have made her home with him. He had been her guardian now for more than a year, and he had actually never seen her. But when he had taken the suffrages of his most intimate lady-friends this hope was quenched.

“She must be sent abroad” was their verdict ; nothing else could possibly counteract that odious Irish accent. Lady Bertram knew of such a charming establishment where two of her nieces had been for years.

Three miles from the city of Tours, and within sight of the village of Roche-Carbon, stood an old gray château, almost buried in woods. The Revolution of '92 had most effectually dispersed its former owners, who surely in their wildest flight of imagination never dreamt that their venerable roof-tree would become one day a boarding-school for the English "Mees"—"Not a school," Madame Daverne affirmed, merely a few young friends, whose education she undertook to superintend for the consideration of three hundred pounds per annum; and a very good investment Madame found that old château, and its rickety obsolete furniture. It is true that she kept a *char à banc* and a pair of fat white horses for the use of her young friends. How otherwise could they go to Tours thrice a-week to receive lessons in music, singing, painting, riding,

fencing, and dancing ? How otherwise attend the English church once a-day on Sunday ? But Jules and his horses were not an expensive item—rent and living were cheap ; Madame was a manager, a strict disciplinarian, and a most excellent teacher.

The château at Rougemont was a delightful place to its young English inmates, entirely different to a great, formal, stiff house at home, with so many rooms on each floor, all the same size, and nothing interesting or unusual from garret to cellar. Here in the château, with its little pepper-castor towers and corkscrew staircases, they were constantly making some novel discovery, whether of a secret panel, or a secret stair, a well, a picture, or a grave. It had even been hinted that an *oubliette* was somewhere on the premises. Rougemont far more resembled the Palace of

the Sleeping Beauty, with its large kitchen and hall, long stone passages and spacious courtyard, than the orthodox establishment for young ladies. It was surrounded by a garden laid out in terraces, connected by flights of shallow steps, and ornamented with clipped yew-trees, closely resembling in shape the toy-trees of the sheepfolds of our youth, and a wonderful and varied collection of stone, plaster, and even coloured wooden statues, which burst upon the eye in the most unlooked-for and surprising manner.

Madame Daverne, the English widow of a French *avocat*, was a little, thin, middle-aged woman, invariably dressed in gray, and never seen without her spectacles. She wore her still abundant dark hair in plain bandeaux—a long-exploded fashion—and no cap. Although her domestic arrangements were managed on

a liberal English scale, and she believed in plenty of cold water, open windows, and *tea*, still she had lived sufficiently long in the country of her adoption to have imbibed a very strong prejudice in favour of *surveillance*, especially as regarded the young friends under her care. No idle chatter about the boys at the Lycée, of love, of lovers, was ever permitted ; novels and romances were unknown and unread. The great outside world, with its sayings and doings, was an unexplored region to Madame Daverne's pupils. Nevertheless, her six young friends found a good deal of happiness in each other's society ; they spent a very busy, healthy life—rambles in the forest, tennis, *la grâce*, and gardening were their usual amusements, and every Thursday during summer and autumn they made expeditions to Loches, Blois, Chinonceaux,

Plessis les Tours, Amboise, or other places of, as Madame observed, "well-known historical interest."

More than six years had passed since the wild little Irish imp had arrived at Rougemont; and in those years what a change had come over her! How marvellously she had improved! Her gusts of passion were among the things of the past, her goat-like impulses had been subdued, her craving to ride every horse she met had long been curbed, her ignorance—who dares to talk of ignorance in connection with Madame Daverne's most brilliant and most accomplished pupil?

Few girls take leave of school and schoolfellows with as much regret as Alice Saville. Rougemont has been her home, and she has no desire to leave the shelter of its gray walls and venture out into the

world alone among strangers. She loves every stick and stone about the old place ; every feature in the landscape she looks out on is a dear familiar friend ; from the “Lanterne” itself to venerable Marmoutier, from Marmoutier to the Cathedral, whence comes the *Angelus*, faintly audible across the waters of the swiftly-rolling, poplar-fringed Loire.

To-morrow Alice is to leave Rougemont for ever. Miss Fane, her guardian’s aunt, is at this instant in the city of Tours. To-morrow she comes to fetch her away ; and no child at the zenith of her enjoyment at a children’s party ever heard the terrible words : “Your nurse has come,” with a chillier thrill of dismay than did Alice when Madame Daverne announced to her that her future protector was about to remove her from her care.

Alice and her friends are sitting on some broken stone steps ; she in the middle, of course, for is not this their last evening together ? and are they not all very fond of Alice, and very very sorry that she is leaving them ? They may well be fond of Alice, for she is the brightest creature that ever lived, and the life and soul of the little community ; a favourite with everyone, from Madame herself down to an old lame *femme de ménage* occasionally called in on domestic emergencies. Who could sing, and dance, and tell ghost-stories like her ? Who dressed up and acted with the inimitable talent of their fair-haired schoolfellow ? Who was as generous, as unselfish, as ready to help, to give, or to lend, as Alice ? Bright and gay, warm-hearted and clever, all the inmates of Rougemont know that when she departs she will leave a blank behind her impossible to fill.

Think of the prettiest girl you ever saw, and it may give you some faint idea of Alice Saville, as she sat on the topmost step but one, with her hands locked round her knees (an easy if not graceful attitude), and her eyes gazing down on the valley of the Loire for the last time. Had your beauty mischievous violet eyes—eyes whose colour was a mystery to many, owing to their rapid change of expression and their sweeping black lashes ; quantities of golden-brown wavy hair rippling and curling away from her forehead, a roseleaf complexion, a purely Grecian profile, and seventeen summers ?

The farewells have been said three months ago ; many tears were shed—and dried ; and now the curtain rises upon new scenes. Touraine and its picturesque old châteaux and dim green woods fades away, to give

place to the narrow, sun-scorched, steppy streets of Valetta.

In a cool spacious apartment, overlooking a Moorish courtyard, filled with orange-trees in green tubs and various semi-tropical plants, Alice and Miss Fane are sitting reading. The post has just come in, and Miss Fane is revelling in an abundant supply of letters, which flutter and rustle in an aggravating manner as the cool sea-breeze steals in and plays with them, and seems to try to snatch from their recipient the full enjoyment of their contents. The breeze plays tenderly and lovingly with Alice Saville's stray little curls, but she reads on and takes no notice. Nothing short of a "Levanter" would rouse her from her study—"Ivanhoe." The world of fiction has been opened to her at last! Miss Fane thinks that "there is no harm in the Waverley novels, with the exception

of the ‘Heart of Midlothian,’” that is carefully put aside ; any of the others Alice may read ; and Alice is rapidly devouring them. Her crewel-work lies neglected on the floor ; her cup of tea stands at her elbow untasted ; and all her thoughts are entirely engrossed in the storming of Torquilstone Castle.

Miss Fane and Alice had spent the autumn in visiting Rome, Florence, and Nice, and were spending a few weeks in Malta before returning to London, where they were to reside together ; and Alice was to make her *début* the ensuing season. She found Valetta altogether delightful. Fresh from her studies, with the history of the Crusades, and of the Knights of Rhodes and Malta still green in her memory, the half-mediæval half-oriental aspect of the place fascinated her beyond measure. Many an hour did she spend in the old

Cathedral of St. John, endeavouring to decipher the tombs with which its numerous chapels are paved. Her knowledge of French and Italian helped her to find out the meaning of their Latin inscriptions, and many and various were the stories she mentally wove about those valiant, war-worn, monkish soldiers lying beneath her feet. "Exploring" was Alice's favourite recreation, as she was not, strictly speaking, "out" as yet; and balls, dancelettes, and yachting picnics were unknown pleasures. The long narrow streets, the "Nix Mangiare" stairs, the odd steep ascents, were an amusing and delightful novelty to her light active feet, but a sore detested pilgrimage to Miss Fane's gaunt old bones. The mysterious little shops that line these queer streets of stairs were another perennial source of interest, including the sleek cats that sat sentry in almost every doorway.

The Maltese themselves were capital subjects for sketches or study; whether they lay flat on their backs, basking in the sun, with their caps pulled over their faces, or lounged in lazy groups about the corners of picturesque old houses, or drove their huge betasselled mules up and down the steep stradas, they were ever and always a fresh novelty to Alice. She little knew that she herself outrivaled the "fried monks" as one of the "sights of Malta;" or that she was the object of general interest and admiration, as, escorted by her austere-looking chaperon, she roamed about, satisfying the curiosity of youth and the craving of a highly imaginative mind.

Miss Fane had been working steadily through her correspondence. Long crossed letters, resembling lattice-work, occupied her for the best part of an hour. At length she came to one in a bold, black, manly

hand, not crossed, not even filling two pages. She knit her brows more than once as she perused it, then slowly folded it, put it in its envelope, and fastened a look that a basilisk might have envied, on her companion.

Glancing up from her novel with a frank fearless countenance, she encountered Miss Fane's cold gray eyes critically surveying her, over the top of her tortoiseshell pince-nez. To describe Miss Fane more particularly, she was a prim, dignified, elderly lady, seated bolt upright on the most uncompromising chair in the room. She had well-cut aristocratic features; a high arrogant-looking nose; rather a spiteful mouth; iron-gray sausage curls, carefully arranged on either temple, and surmounted by a sensibly sedate cap. A very handsome brown silk dress, as stiff as herself, completed her costume.

Not being overburdened with this world's goods, owing to the failure of a bank in which most of her fortune had been invested, she had accepted a very handsome allowance and the post of chaperon to her nephew's ward. If she could have had this immense increase to her income without the ward, so much the better; girls were not to her taste, but though narrow-minded, frigid, and intensely selfish, she was strictly conscientious, according to her lights, and was thoroughly prepared to do her duty by her young companion.

"Alice," she said, glancing from Alice to the note she held in her hand, and then back again with an air of hesitation, "I have just heard from my nephew, your guardian, you know. He expects to leave India immediately; and if the *Euphrates* stops here for coaling, he says he will come and look us up. Would you like to

read his letter? Perhaps I ought not to show it to you; but it will give you some idea of the kind of young man he is."

"Thank you," replied his ward, stretching out a slim ready hand; "if you really think I *may*, Miss Fane," she added interrogatively, whereupon Miss Fane handed her her nephew's effusion, which ran as follows:

"Cheetapore.

"**MY DEAR AUNT MARY,**

"I got your last letter all right. I did not answer it at once as I had nothing to say, and am no scribe at the best of times. I quite agree with you, that you had much better take entire charge of Miss Saville now she has left school; but why not have kept her there another year or two? Your suggestion is excellent, and you will

make a much more fitting guardian than my unworthy self. I do not know what on earth I should have done with her if you had not come to the rescue. I cannot imagine what possessed my father to leave me, of all people, guardian to a girl. Of course I shall look after her money affairs, etc., but I hope you will take her off my hands completely. No doubt she will marry soon, as you say she is pretty, and if the *parti* is anything like a decent fellow, and comes up to the mark in the way of settlements, you may take my consent for granted—I shall say: ‘Bless you, my children,’ with unmixed satisfaction. I am bringing you some shawls, curios, etc., to make amends for my shortcomings as a correspondent. We sail from Bombay on the twenty-second, and if we coal at Malta I shall look you up. What in the world took you there? It strikes

me you are becoming a regular ‘globe-trotter’ in your old age.

“ Your affectionate Nephew,

“ R. M. FAIRFAX.”

“ What a funny letter, or note rather ! ” exclaimed Alice ; “ only two sides of the paper. The Fifth Hussars have a very pretty crest ; and what a good hand he writes ! He certainly seems very anxious to get rid of *me*, does he not, Miss Fane ? I am afraid I am a great infliction,” she added, colouring, “ but I will do my best to trouble him as little as possible.”

“ I will make you a much more suitable guardian,” returned Miss Fane complacently. “ I do not know what my brother-in-law could have been dreaming about when he made his will. Poor man ! he naturally thought he had yet many years to live, and never contemplated your

having such a preposterously young guardian. Reginald cares for nothing beyond his profession—horses, racing, and men's society. My brother-in-law spoiled him as a boy, and allowed him his own way completely, though I believe he was a good son and very much attached to his father. Greville was a weak-minded man," she pursued, shaking her head reflectively, "governed first by his wife and then by his son. Reginald has always been his own master, and is headstrong and overbearing to the last degree."

"You don't like him, Miss Fane?" inquired Alice, slightly raising her eyebrows.

"Ah well!" hesitatingly, "I don't exactly say that; I have seen so little of him since he was a boy; and then he was, without exception, the most troublesome, mischievous, impudent urchin I ever

came across ; always in trouble, falling out of trees, or downstairs, or off his pony, playing practical jokes, fighting the gardener's big boys, riding his father's hunters on the sly. He kept everyone in hot water. I spent six *months* at Looton, and added six *years* to my life," concluded Miss Fane, nodding her head with much solemnity.

The truth was, Miss Fane had gone to Looton on a very long visit, with the intention of remaining permanently as virtual mistress. Her easy-going brother-in-law would have made no objection, but her impish nephew immediately saw through her object, and made her life unbearable. His practical jokes were chiefly at her expense, and the way in which he teased her beloved poodle was simply intolerable. She had to give up her intention of remaining, and leave what she had fully

intended to have been a most luxurious home.

This she had never forgotten, nor forgiven; her feelings on the subject had been stifled, but they smouldered. She never cared for her nephew—never would; he was far too like his mother—her handsome stepsister—whom she had detested with all her heart. Nevertheless, she found it to her advantage to be on apparently good terms with her liberal and wealthy relative, who had not the remotest idea of the real feelings his aunt secretly cherished towards him.

About a week later the *Euphrates* came into Malta, late one evening. Miss Fane and the Lee-Dormers were dining at the Governor's; Alice, not being "out," had tea *solus* at home.

Time hung heavily on her hands; her

book was stupid, she was not in the humour for music, and it was too early to go to bed. Opening the window, she stepped out on the balcony that ran all round the house and overlooked the court-yard. Here she remained for a long time, her chin resting on her hand, indulging in a day-dream—"in maiden meditation, fancy free." The air was laden with the perfume of twenty different flowers; but the fragrant orange-trees in their tubs down below overpowered all.

"How delicious!" said Alice to herself, sniffing the air. "If I am ever married—which is not very likely—I shall have a wreath of real orange-blossoms, always supposing I can get them."

Presently she turned her attention to the stars, and endeavoured to make out some of the constellations, not very successfully, it must be confessed. She

listened to the distant driving through Valetta.

"Belated sightseers returning to their steamers," she thought.

Just then a carriage drove rapidly into their quiet street, and seemed to stop close by.

"It can't be Miss Fane come home already; they are barely at coffee yet," she mentally remarked, as she settled herself for another reverie.

After a while, feeling rather chilly, she pushed open the window and stepped back into the sitting-room. For a moment the light dazzled her eyes. That moment past, what was her amazement to find a handsome young man, in undress cavalry uniform, standing on the rug with his back to the fire!

The surprise was apparently mutual. However, he at once came forward and said:

"Miss Saville, I am sure. The servant said my aunt was out, but that you were at home. As the room was empty, I concluded you had gone to bed."

"When did you arrive?" she asked, offering her hand.

"We came in about two hours ago, and are going to coal all night—a most detestable but necessary performance."

"Have you been here long?" was her next question, as she seated herself near the table.

"About twenty minutes. I have been enjoying this English-looking fire immensely. You must have found it rather chilly in the verandah, I should say."

A thought flitted through his mind—"Was there a Romeo to this lovely Juliet?" He looked down at her with a quick keen glance. No; the idea was absurd.

“What were you doing out there this cool evening?” he added.

“Nothing,” she replied shyly. She could not bring herself to tell this brilliant stranger that she had been simply star-gazing.

“A regular bread-and-butter miss,” he thought, as he pulled his moustache with a leisurely patronising look.

Bread-and-butter or not, she was an extremely pretty girl, and his ward. The idea tickled him immensely. He put his hand before his mouth to conceal an involuntary smile.

“Vernon or Harcourt would give a good deal to be in my shoes, I fancy,” he said to himself, as he took a seat at the opposite side of the table from his charge.

Alice having mastered her first astonishment, felt that it behoved her to make some attempt at conversation, and to

endeavour to entertain this unexpected guest, pending Miss Fane's return. She offered him refreshments, coffee, etc., which he declined, having dined previously to coming on shore. With small-talk, Maltese curios, and the never-failing topic—weather, she managed to while away the time. At first her voice was very low, as it always was when she was nervous or embarrassed, but she soon recovered herself, and played the part of hostess in a manner that astonished the man who, half-an-hour before, had called her (mentally) “a bread-and-butter miss.” Seven years on the Continent had given her at least easy polished manners. She had none of the *gaucherie* so common to an English girl of her own age, brought up exclusively at home. It seemed to her that Sir Reginald was *shy*!—he sat opposite to her playing with a paperknife, and

by no means properly supporting his share of the conversation. Her good-natured efforts amused him prodigiously. He was sufficiently sharp to see that she thought him bashful and diffident, whereas he was only lazy ; he preferred to allow ladies, whenever they were good enough to talk to him, to carry on the most of the conversation, a few monosyllables, and his eloquent dark eyes, contributing his share. Poor deluded Alice ! she little knew that the apparently diffident young man was the life and soul of his mess, and that shyness was unknown to him (except by name) since he had been out of his nurse's arms.

Conversation presently became somewhat brisker ; they exchanged experiences of Germany and India. They discussed books, horses, and music, and at the end of an hour Alice felt as if she had known

him for at least a year. Certainly they had made as much progress in each other's confidence as if they had gone through a London season together, when a few brief utterances are gasped between the pauses in a waltz, or whispered on the stairs, or interrupted by some spoilsport in the Row.

As for Reginald, he not only felt completely at home, but, what was worse, most thoroughly bewitched.

“I’m never going to be so mad as to lose my head about this grown-up child, am I ?” he indignantly asked himself. “I who have hitherto been invulnerable, as far as the tender passion is concerned. No ! not likely. If I can’t face a pretty girl without immediately feeling smitten, the sooner I renounce the whole sex the better.”

Whilst he was thinking thus, he was

to all appearance immersed in a series of views of Rome and Florence, and listening to a description of palaces, churches, and tombs.

There was not the slightest *soupçon* of a flirtation between this couple. Sir Reginald talked to his ward as he would to his grandmother, and there was a look in her clear deep gray eyes that would have abashed the most thorough-paced male flirt in Christendom—which he was very far from being—a look half of childish innocence, half of newly-awakened maiden dignity—

Standing where the rivers meet,
Womanhood and childhood sweet.

Miss Fane duly returned, and accorded her nephew a warm welcome and a kiss, which he very reluctantly received, for she had also a *moustache*! She treated

him besides to a most *recherché* little supper, and at twelve o'clock he took his departure, faithfully promising to look them out a suitable house in London, and with an uneasy conviction that he had met his fate.

I need scarcely tell the astute reader that the acquaintance thus formed shortly ripened into something else : a few dances—a few rides in the Row—a water-party—the Cup-day at Ascot—finally a moonlight picnic, and the thing was settled.

Before the end of the season the following announcement appeared in *The Times* :

“On the 25th inst., at St. George’s, Hanover Square, by the Lord Bishop of Bermuda, assisted by the Rev. H. Fane, Sir Reginald Mostyn Fairfax, Bart.,

Captain Fifth Hussars, of Looton Park, Bordershire, to Alice Eveleen, only child of the late Major-General Saville."

Sir Reginald expressed his intention of retiring, much to the disgust of his brother-officers, who said they thought Fairfax was the last man who would have married and left them. "You of all people too! After the way you used to be down on other fellows who fell in love, or got married—it's perfectly shameful! You were actually the means of nipping several very promising affairs in the bud, and now you are going to get married yourself. What excuse have you to make?" cried an indignant hussar.

"I say," replied Sir Reginald complacently, "'that he jests at scars who never felt a wound.' That was my case. Now I'm a reformed character."

But when at the drawing-room, the opera, and elsewhere, the Fifth saw the future Lady Fairfax, even the most hardened bachelor among them frankly admitted that "Rex," as they called him, had a very fair excuse.

After their honeymoon the Fairfaxes went down to Looton, where they were considered the handsomest and happiest couple within three counties.

CHAPTER III.

LOOTON PARK.

LOOTON is a large, ugly, uncomfortable old place, similar to hundreds of others scattered over the British isles. No one knows exactly when it was built, but everyone is aware that it is surrounded by the very best land in Bordershire. The house stands in a large well-timbered park, and is approached by two avenues from opposite directions.

Seated at the library-table, with his elbows well squared, a young man of about one-and-twenty is dashing off a letter.

He is Geoffrey Saville, first cousin to Lady Fairfax, and has lately joined the Fifth Hussars—so lately that he is still doing riding-school, from which a fortnight's visit to Looton has afforded him temporary emancipation.

He is a slim, bright-eyed, loose-limbed boy, with small impudent hazel eyes, an aristocratic nose, and light-brown hair, of which one utterly unreasonable lock always sticks up on the top of his head, cut, and comb, and oil as he will. He is possessed of the highest of spirits, the best of appetites, and unlimited assurance. He is gay, gentlemanly, and generous, and swears by his new cousin, but old friend, Sir Reginald Fairfax.

Here is his letter :

“ MY DEAR NOBBS,

“ I promised to send you a line to

let you know how I was getting on. Rex and Alice make no end of a good host and hostess ; the feeding is superior, and as to horses, I am ‘all found.’ Rex mounts me as he mounts himself, and I take it out of his cattle fairly.

“We have had two or three good runs with the R. B. H. and Overstones, especially last Tuesday; found at Heplow—(you don’t know where that is, but never mind)—and ran to Clumber, a distance of eight miles as the crow flies, with only one slight check. The pace was prime, the grief awful. The fields were large and airy, but some of the fences, notably the bullfinches, were real raspers. The finish was highly select—Alice, Reginald, two cavalry men, a parson, the huntsman, and yours obediently. Alice goes like a bird ; and in a neat double-breasted brown habit and pot-hat to match, and mounted on a clipping

bay thoroughbred, looks very 'fit' indeed. Rex pilots her, and they make a very fair average example of the field. You know what a customer he is. She follows him as if she had a spare neck in her pocket, and charges wood and water as boldly as he does himself.

"Talking of water, there is a brute of a river here, called the Swale, which winds about in the most mysterious manner. You come across it when you least expect it. I have already been in twice! I paid my second visit last Friday. I was steaming along close to the pack, when what should I see in front of me but this sneak of a river. I rammed in the spurs, and thundered down to it as hard as I could go, but I had already bucketed the old horse too freely: he bore down as if he meant business, stopped short, and shot me over his head into about seven feet

of muddy water. I'll leave you to imagine the figure I was when I picked myself out !

"I created a fine sensation all along the Queen's highway *en route* home. Alice and Reginald have never stopped chaffing me ever since. You ask me how he plays the *rôle* of married man ? Capitally, my dear fellow ; and as to your unkind insinuation that I must be rather in the way, considering they are so recently married, you never were more mistaken in your life. They are not a bit a spooney couple ; at least I never see any billing or cooing, thank goodness, and I favour them with a good deal of my society ; but anyone can see with half an eye that each thinks the other perfection, and that they suit down to the ground. He has got a fortnight's domestic privilege leave to go and see poor Maitland of the Blues, who is dying at Cannes ; they were great

chums always, and at Eton together. Meanwhile I remain here and help old Miss Fane (a bitter specimen of the unappropriated blessing) to take care of the fair châtelaine ; and as I am to exercise the hunters, and have the run of the stable, I am promising myself five days a week between the two packs, and the very cream of hunting. I wish you would go to Thomas and hurry him with my tops, and run me in for another fortnight's leave, as enclosed. If the chief looks grumpy, say I have broken my collar-bone. I'll do as much for you another time.

“Yours in clover,

“GEOFFREY SAVILLE.”

CHAPTER IV.

A PRACTICAL JOKE.

SIR REGINALD left for Cannes the end of November, intending to spend a week there, and to be home, of course, long before Christmas. Meanwhile, a plot he little dreamt of had been hatched for his benefit. A storm was brewing ; in fact, a regular cyclone threatened his domestic atmosphere.

When he was in India with the Fifth Hussars, among his few lady acquaintances outside the regiment there was one who had taken an immense fancy to him

—a fancy he by no means reciprocated. She was the daughter of an old Commissariat officer, who had survived to enjoy his off-reckonings and settled down at Cheetapore. “After thirty-eight years of India, he could not stand England,” he said; “one winter there would finish him.”

Miss Mason had been already four seasons on the plains. The climate was beginning to tarnish her beauty—the dark Italian style, her friends declared. Her foes, on the other hand, did not scruple to accuse her of “four annas in the rupee”—native blood, in fact. She was, nevertheless, one of the belles of the station. Time was flying, as I have said before, her good looks were waning, and she was becoming extremely anxious to be settled. Fully determined to marry well, thoroughly bold and unscrupulous,

and believing firmly in Thackeray's dictum, "that any woman who has not positively a hump can marry any man she pleases," she looked about her, to see whom she would have.

One of the Fifth Hussars for choice ; they were mostly well-born, and all rich. After some hesitation, she made up her mind that Captain Fairfax (as he then was) was perhaps the most desirable of the lot. A future baronet, of distinguished appearance, young, rich, and extremely popular, what more could she wish for ? Not much, indeed.

But he rarely mixed in ladies' society ; and there was a certain *hauteur* about him—a kind of "touch-me-not" air—that inclined her to think he might give her some trouble. But then he was worth it How good-looking he was—his keen dark eyes, regular features, and thick moustache,

together with his slight well-knit figure, quite fulfilled her beau-ideal of a handsome, gallant hussar.

So she prepared to lay siege to him, and at once commenced to bring her heavy guns into action. But it was in vain—all in vain. It was useless to waylay him in the ride of a morning ; with a hurried bow he cantered on. It was equally futile to get a friendly chaperon to escort her to cavalry parades on Wednesday mornings, for after drill he invariably went off to stables. Polo, at which he was a great performer, was also a blank, as whenever it was over, instead of lounging and talking to the lady spectators, he mounted his hack and disappeared. At the races she was more successful, and began to think she was making way at last. The Hussars had a tent, and, being one of the hosts, Sir Reginald was brought in contact with

her repeatedly. But what she attributed to special attention was merely the courtesy with which he treated all the sex.

At balls she danced with him several times; but she could see that he much preferred dancing to talking, and grudged every moment that she wasted in conversation. However, “Rome was not built in a day.” “Patience,” she thought, “and I shall be Lady Fairfax yet. He is no flirt, and does not devote himself to any lady here, married or single. All this is a point in *my* favour,” she reflected. “He only wants drawing out; he is reserved and cold, but never fear, I shall thaw him.” She invited him repeatedly to her father’s house, invitations which he steadily and politely declined, and still not discouraged, made a point of stopping and accosting him wherever they met, were it on the road, coming out of church, or

at the band. She endeavoured to arrange playful bets on trifling subjects, and made frequent allusions to the language of flowers ; forced button-holes on him, and finally calling him to her carriage as he was riding past at the band, one evening —it was dark, and he fondly hoped to disappear unnoticed —she entreated him to dismount and have a chat.

“I cannot—very many thanks—as this is guest-night, and I have some fellows coming to dinner, and it is now”—looking at his watch—“a quarter to seven.”

“And what of that ?” she returned playfully ; “surely you can spare *me* a few minutes ?”

Dead silence, during which her victim was revolving in his brain his chances of escape.

“Have you any sisters, Captain Fairfax ?” she inquired, apropos of nothing.

“No; I wish I had.”

“You would be very fond of them, I am sure”—effusively.

“I daresay I would.”

“Ah!” she exclaimed, leaning over and patting his horse’s back caressingly, and looking up into his face with her bold black eyes—“ah, Captain Fairfax, how I should like to be your sister!”

With an imperceptible shudder he replied in his most frosty tone:

“You do me far too much honour, Miss Mason.”

“Not at all,” she said impressively; “*nothing* is too good for you, in my opinion.”

“You are very kind to say so, I am sure,” he replied, much embarrassed. “I must really be off,” gathering up his reins.

“Stay, stay—one second,” she entreated.

“ You remember the cracker we pulled together at the General’s on Monday, and I would not show you the motto? I was ashamed.”

“ No doubt you were; some wretched, vulgar rubbish”—preparing to depart.

“ No, no, not that,” she cried eagerly, “ only—only—you will understand all when I give it to you—when *I* give it to *you*, you understand. I know you will not think it either wretched or vulgar when you read it. Do not look at it till you get home and are quite—quite *alone*,” she added, pressing an envelope into his most reluctant hand.

“ All right,” he replied, taking off his hat and rapidly riding away, only too glad to escape.

In the privacy of his own room he opened the mysterious envelope, and held

its contents—a narrow slip of paper—to the lamp. It ran as follows :

My hand, my heart, my life, are thine ;
Thy hand, thy heart, thy life, are mine.

“Not that I know of,” he exclaimed fiercely, and colouring to the roots of his hair. “The woman must be insane,” he muttered, tearing the motto into fragments and scattering them on the floor. “She could not really think I cared two straws about her. If it is a joke, as of course it is,” he proceeded, “it is by no means a nice one, or one that a thoroughly lady-like girl would ever dream of practising. If she *were* my sister,” he continued, with a grim smile, “I would give her a piece of my mind that would astonish her weak nerves. God forbid she was any relation to me !” he added fervently. “I’ll give her an uncommonly wide berth for the future.”

This mental resolve of his was most

rigidly carried out. He avoided Miss Mason in an unmistakable manner, and held aloof from society on her account. It took her some time to realise this painful fact, but when she did grasp it her whole soul rose in arms ; and hearing about the same period a remark he had made about her—viz. “that she might be considered a fine-looking woman, but was not at all his style, and that he thought her awfully bad form.” This, though breathed in confidence over a midnight cheroot, *en route* from a dance where Miss Mason had been making herself more than usually conspicuous—came round to her ears, and acted like a match in gunpowder, oil in flame. The most venomous hatred took the place of her former admiration, and an insatiate craving for revenge filled her fair bosom—a revenge she fully determined to gratify on the earliest possible occasion.

Time went on, the Hussars left for England, and the wedding of Alice and Reginald found its way into the *Home News*. "Now," thought she, "I will have my innings. I will drop a shell into his camp that will astonish him, to say the least of it, and I'll light the match at once."

Miss Mason's dearest friend and inveterate ally was spending the day with her. It was October, and although the hot weather was a thing of the past, yet it was still warm, and occasionally muggy. Tiffin concluded, the two ladies retired, Indian fashion, to Miss Mason's room, and there donned cool white dressing-gowns, and subsided into long cane-lounges. For some time the monotonous creaking of the punkah-rope alone broke the silence.

Presently Miss Mason said: "Harriet

Chambers, I have been a good friend to you. Have I not stood by you through thick and thin, and helped you out of one or two nasty scrapes ? ”

“ You have indeed, dear Charlotte,” replied Mrs. Chambers in grateful accents, and with a visibly heightened colour.

“ Well now, I want you to do something for me—only a trifle after all, but still I would rather trust you than anyone.”

“ What can I do ? Whatever it is, I shall be only too glad,” returned Mrs. Chambers effusively.

“ Well, my dear, I’ll soon tell you. You recollect Captain Fairfax of the Hussars ? ”

“ Yes, of course I do ; a dark young man, who won the Arconum cup, and spent all his time out shikarring.”

“ Exactly ! but he found time enough to be very rude to me and I wish to pay him off somehow.”

“But what did he do?” asked Mrs. Chambers, her curiosity aroused.

“Never mind what he did—he treated me shamefully, cruelly, abominably,” returned Miss Mason with venomous *empressement* and a noble indifference to facts.

“Well, at any rate, he has left the country now,” put in Mrs. Chambers soothingly.

“But a letter can always reach him. I know his address at home. He is just married, and I was thinking of giving them a little bone of contention to amuse themselves with—something to ruffle up the dead, flat monotony of the honeymoon. For instance, a sham marriage certificate would give her a good fright.”

“Oh! but, my dear Charlotte,” gasped her friend, raising herself to a sitting posture, “you are joking. You would not think of such a thing.”

“Would I not?” replied Charlotte, with an unpleasant laugh and shake of her

head. "I have thought of it, and, what is more, I mean to do it."

"But you might cause fearful mischief; and, besides, I am sure it's forgery," Mrs. Chambers added with an awestruck voice.

"Not a bit of it," said Miss Mason lightly. "I have laid all my plans. Listen," she continued, sitting up. "Oh, bother these mosquitoes," waving her handkerchief to and fro. "Now attend to me. You know the clerk of All Saints', a stupid, drunken old wretch, who would sell his soul for ten rupees. I have bribed him to let me have the church register and a lot of spare printed copies of certificates—blank forms, you know. I pretend I want to look out something for a friend. He brought the register here this morning, and I am to have it ready for him when he calls after dark; for, although there are very few weddings—more's the pity—and no one

troubles about the register at All Saints', yet such books are not supposed to go travelling about in this style. Here it is," and from beneath the mattress of her bed she produced a thick calf-bound volume. "Here are the printed forms," she continued, getting up and busying herself arranging a writing-table, which she pushed towards her friend, whose eyes followed her movements in dumb amazement. "Now," she said, "Harriet, you are to copy a certificate of marriage on one of these blank strips, do you see."

"I!" cried Mrs. Chambers. "Good heavens, Charlotte, you are out of your mind! It would be downright forgery. You are mad to think of it."

"Forgery! Folly—it's only a joke. After the first glance, no woman in her senses would see it in any other light. It's a joke, I tell you—a *joke*, and I know," she

added, looking her friend straight in the face, "that for several *reasons* you will not refuse me."

"Oh, but really—really," faltered her victim.

"Yes, but really you will do it. Do you think I would ask you to do anything that was not right—that was illegal? Come, come, Harriet, here is a chair. You imitate writing so splendidly, you will have to oblige me, and I'll give you my gold swami earrings into the bargain, besides all the good offices I have already done for you."

Finding herself in the presence of a vigorous will, Mrs. Chambers, who was weak-minded and indolent, eventually succumbed, and very reluctantly settled to her task. The last marriage certificate was used as a copy, and splendidly imitated by Mrs. Chambers; the name of Reginald

Fairfax was substituted for the man, and Fanny Cole for the spinster. The witnesses' and the clergyman's signatures were added. The only name that was really forged was the clergyman's: "A correct copy of certificate of marriage as signed and attested by me.—HUGH PARRY."

This was a facsimile; the remaining part of the certificate was in a round clerkly hand, as if copied by that functionary. It was finished, and, villainous document as it was, was in every respect to all appearance an authorised and legal copy of a certificate of marriage.

Miss Mason having quieted her friend's scruples by assuring her over and over again that it was "only a joke," and having refreshed her with five-o'clock tea and half a brandy-and-soda, and sworn her to profoundest secrecy, dismissed her tool with much affectionate demonstration.

She then locked up the book and papers and went for a drive, with the calm conviction that she had done a good afternoon's work. The following day an anonymous letter containing the mock certificate was despatched to Lady Fairfax.

I should here mention that when the old clerk called for the register and his ten rupees, and got them, he hastened to the Bazaar and laid in a fine supply of arrack, which he conveyed to his solitary “go down.” His orgie was on such an extensive scale that when he upset a lighted kerosine lamp he was perfectly incapable of stirring or extinguishing it, so he and his house and the marriage register were all consumed together. This occurrence was related to Miss Mason a few evenings afterwards at the band, as one of the items of local “gup;” also that the church register was missing—had

recently and mysteriously disappeared ; and that the general belief was that the defunct clerk had made away with it.

Miss Mason received the intelligence as a polite but totally disinterested listener ; but as she rolled along the dusty roads in her carriage, on her way home, she thought all the time of her little joke and its probable consequences.

“‘Sweet is revenge, especially to women.’ I forget who wrote that ; but it’s true,” she murmured. “Mine is even more complete than I had expected. Mr. Parry is dead ; the clerk and the register burnt ; the witnesses, John and Jane Fox, gone to Australia nearly two years ago. Clear yourself if you can, Sir Reginald Fairfax ; I’ll not help you ; and I think you will find that I have given you a difficult task.”

Such were Miss Mason’s reflections, and

her amiability for the next two or three days was as surprising as it was unbounded. Occasionally she would lean back in her low capacious Singapore chair, drop her book in her lap, and indulge in a long and evidently delightful reverie, bewildering her foolish old father by sundry fits of wholly unexplained suppressed laughter.

"What ails you, Charlotte, my girl? What's the matter?" he asked once, somewhat timidly.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing that would interest you, daddy; only a little bit of a practical joke that I have played on somebody."

CHAPTER V.

THE THUNDERBOLT.

ALICE, Miss Fane, and Geoffrey were seated at the breakfast-table one drizzling December morning. The post had just come in. Geoffrey, having unlocked the bag, was distributing the letters.

“One for you, Miss Fane ; looks like a bill,” said he mischievously. “Two young-lady letters for you, Alice, and one from Fairfax, of course. I wonder he does not write thrice a day, and telegraph at intervals : ‘How are you, my darling ? Are you thinking of me, my treasure ?’ What will

you give for it? It's a pretty thick one,"
feeling it critically. "See what it is to
be a bride," and he chanted :

"They were never weary; they seemed each day
Fresh ecstasy to imbibe;
And they gazed in each other's eyes in a way
That I really can't describe.
And once it was my lot to see
What shocked my sensitive taste:
They were sitting as close as wax, and he
Had his arm about her waist."

"That you never did, you rude boy.
Here, give me my letter at once, sir!"
cried Alice, half rising.

"Madam, take it. You need not be
blushing like that; it makes me quite hot
to look at you. After all, you never did
shock my sensitive taste as yet, and I hope
you never will. Now for the newspapers,"
diving again into the bag. "Halloa!
here's another letter, Alice—from India,

I declare, and a good fat one too. Who is your correspondent—a former disconsolate admirer, writing from the East to upbraid you with your perfidy?"

"Nonsense, Geoff; how can you talk such utter rubbish? I'm sure I don't know who it can be from," turning the letter over. "Cheetapore! I know no one there."

"Well, look sharp and open it, and you'll soon see. Most likely a bill of Reginald's. I thought he was a ready-money man," said Geoffrey austerely.

Alice cut the envelope cautiously, and drew out a thin note and a long slip of paper. The note ran as follows:

"**MADAM,**

"The enclosed will show you that Sir Reginald Fairfax is not *your* husband. He has deceived you as he has

deceived others. His quiet exterior conceals his real disposition. He is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

“ONE WHO KNOWS HIM WELL.”

Greatly bewildered, and with trembling hands, Alice unfolded the enclosure, and gazed at it for some time before she exactly understood what she was looking at.

Copy of Certificate of Marriage, All Saints' Church,
Cheetapore.

Reginald Mostyn Fairfax, Bachelor—Fanny
Cole, Spinster.

Hugh Parry, Clerk.
Marie Fox and John Fox, Witnesses.

White as a sheet, and trembling like a leaf, Alice handed this, along with the letter, to Miss Fane.

“ What does it mean, Miss Fane ? ” she asked, almost in a whisper.

Miss Fane, having adjusted her pince-nez carefully, took both and read them, and as she read her countenance changed from purple to yellow, from yellow to purple, Alice meanwhile devouring her with her eyes.

“ I cannot make it out,” she said at last. “ It seems to be a perfectly correct copy of a certificate of marriage, does it not, Geoffrey ? ”

Geoffrey stretched out a ready hand for the letter and certificate ; but the first glance at the letter had the same appalling effect on him as on the two ladies. After a dead silence, during which the ticking of the clock and falling of the cinders were distinctly audible, he plucked up courage to say :

“ A hoax, of course.”

"How are we to know that?" asked Miss Fane, drawing herself up.

"I'll take it up to London and show it to some first-rate solicitor and ask his opinion; it's only four hours by rail. Will that do?" pushing back his chair and looking at Alice interrogatively.

"Yes, do, my dear Geoff; and go at once," she cried eagerly; "for though I know it is a ridiculous mistake, still I feel quite odd and frightened. But perhaps," she added, after a moment's pause, "we should wait till Reginald comes home the day after to-morrow; he will clear it up. Yes, second thoughts are best; we will wait, thank you, Geoff, all the same."

"No, no, my dear!" said Miss Fane, emphatically, "the sooner the matter is cleared up the better. I must beg you to take my advice on the subject as a person much older and more experienced than

either of you. Geoffrey can easily catch the ten-o'clock train. It is now," looking at the clock, "a quarter-past nine."

After a short discussion, during which the elder lady carried all before her, it was settled that Geoffrey was to start at once; so he quickly bolted his breakfast, and within half-an-hour was speeding up to London as fast as an express could take him. Thinking it better to consult some older head, he drove from Waterloo Station to Wessex Gardens, where Mr. and Mrs. Mayhew, Sir Reginald's first cousins, lived. The Honorable Mark and his wife were at luncheon when Geoffrey entered, and without any beating about the bush bluntly told his errand. They examined the certificate with the greatest incredulity, and laughed at the idea of "Rex" of all people committing bigamy, "he so upright, so honourable, a man of stainless character,



who had never been known to make a love affair in his life till he met Alice," they chimed alternately. "The idea was really too absurd ; they wondered Geoffrey could lend himself to such a wild-goose chase." Nevertheless there was the certificate, "and just to show that it is a forgery and to relieve Miss Fane's mind, you and Geoff will take it to some respectable solicitors and quietly ask their opinion," said Mr. Mayhew. So they took it to Bagge and Keepe, an intensely correct firm ; and Mr. Bagge, after carefully scrutinising the certificate for some seconds, unhesitatingly pronounced it to be a genuine copy, and swore to the handwriting of the Rev. Hugh Parry, who had been one of their clients for years. "I can show you any number of his letters, and you can judge for yourselves, gentlemen," he added, preparing to open a brown japanned box, on

which “R. and H. Parry” was emblazoned in large white characters.

The little hatchet-faced lawyer, with his penetrating gray eyes and mutton-chop whiskers, seemed so perfectly confident of the identity of the signature and the truth of the certificate, that Mr. Mayhew’s breath was, metaphorically speaking, quite taken away, and he gazed from him to Geoffrey—whose visage had visibly lengthened—with an air of utter stupefaction. His moral equilibrium was completely shaken, as he glanced from Mr. Bagge to the deed-box, from the deed-box to Geoffrey, from Geoffrey to the long slip of white paper—the cause of all the mischief—that lay on the green baize table before his eyes. He pushed his hat well to the back of his head, scratched his grizzly locks, and obviously obtained some kind of mental inspiration, for at last he found words :

"It is of no consequence at present, Mr. Bagge. I'm much obliged to you all the same. And—a—you are quite certain of this"—flourishing the certificate—"being Mr. Parry's signature?"

"Quite certain. You can compare it yourself. Hancock,"—to a clerk—"just reach down—"

"Never mind—not to-day—another time. Thank you; a—good morning. Come along, Geoffrey," said the Honorable Mark, backing himself through a swing-door, and effecting his exit with extraordinary promptitude, leaving Mr. Bagge under an impression that he had been visited by a gentleman who ought to be carefully looked after by his friends, if not immediately consigned to a lunatic asylum.

"It is a queer business, Geoff," exclaimed Mr. Mayhew, once they found themselves in the street, "a very queer business!"

striding along at a tremendous pace, and looking very red in the face; “but Reginald’s sure to make it all right, you may take your oath of that. Just leave it to him to settle. He’ll be back in a couple of days. Mind you don’t miss the train—it’s now a quarter-past five. Here’s a hansom. Hop in, or you’ll be late. Give Alice my love, and tell her it’s all right; it will be all cleared up when Rex comes home. Waterloo,” to the driver.

“All very fine,” muttered Geoffrey to himself as he was rattled over the pavement; “I wish he had to face Miss Fane, with Bagge’s opinion, instead of me. She’ll get it out of me before she sleeps to-night, so I suppose I had better make a virtue of necessity and tell the truth at once. Won’t she just make a row ! ”

Alice having despatched Geoffrey, and seen him fairly off to the station, as fast

as the fastest harness hack could take him, went up to her own room, and there read her husband's letter, from which her attention had been so rudely diverted. It was a nice letter for a young wife to get—not a spooney, love-lorn effusion, but a good, rational, amusing letter, that had evidently given as much pleasure to the writer to write as to Alice to receive, and that, without fulsome extravagance, breathed a spirit of true, proud, tender love from the first page to the last. Till now, yesterday's had been to Alice the best and most precious of letters ; now to-day's came to put it aside, and would in turn give place to to-morrow's, for the last was always the most prized.

Having read and re-read her letter, Alice felt a double reliance on her husband and a sovereign contempt for the marriage certificate, which must be either someone else's

or intended for a shameful hoax. Much emboldened and encouraged by these reflections, Alice ran downstairs in search of Miss Fane, whom she found knitting in the morning-room, with an ominous purse on her lips and a frown on her brow.

She was sitting in the window, and merely raised her eyes for a second as Alice entered. Alice approached her, and, leaning against the window—with one hand in her pocket surreptitiously grasping her precious letter—plunged boldly into conversation.

“Miss Fane, I want to talk to you about this dreadful certificate. What do you think about it? For my own part, I most certainly will never believe that Reginald was ever married to anyone but me. It is some excessively bad joke that he and I will be laughing over together before

the end of the week. Don't you think so?"

"My dear, if you have fully made up your mind, why ask me?" returned Miss Fane coldly.

"Because I have no one else to talk to about it. You are his aunt—his mother's sister. You would not believe such a thing of him, I know."

Miss Fane drew in her lips and knitted faster and more fiercely than ever.

Alice, kneeling beside her, softly laid her hand on her arm and said: "You know I have no mother to advise me, or think for me; and I am so dreadfully young, and foolish, even for my age. Don't you think, if my mother were alive, she would say, 'Trust your husband?' In my heart I do sincerely trust him. Don't you?"

"Yes," replied Miss Fane; and then,

after a pause, added : “ That is to say, as much as *any* young man can be trusted. His mother was certainly my sister, but we were very little together, as I lived chiefly at my grandfather’s. She was a handsome headstrong girl. Reginald has his mother’s eyes and his mother’s temper, or I am much mistaken. You would not have found her very easy to get on with, had she been spared,” observed Miss Fane charitably ; “ but she died, poor thing, when she was two-and-twenty. My brother-in-law was inconsolable ; he adored her, and spoiled her, and did the same for her son.”

“ Do not say that, Miss Fane. If Reginald had been spoiled he could never have grown up as he has done—so good, so honourable, so——”

“ Yes, yes,” interrupted Miss Fane irritably. “ All brides of two or three months say the same.”



"There are very few like Reginald, nevertheless," said Alice warmly. "I know him, of course, better than anyone now."

"Or you think you do," interrupted Miss Fane, "which comes to the same thing."

"*I know* I do! I don't believe he has a thought that I might not share; he is true, upright, unselfish. Self he never thinks of; I am his first thought in everything. He loves me far too dearly to bring any such dreadful grief near me as this certificate hints at. I will put all thoughts of it out of my head till he comes home. Don't you think I am wise?" she asked earnestly.

"Yes; in a certain sense you are; but if it is not cleared up you will be all the more unprepared to receive the shock. My motto is, 'Prepare for the worst, hope for the best, and take what comes.' This is a very serious matter, and requires serious

thought. I have been turning it over in my mind for the last hour. Shall I tell you what I think?" gazing solemnly over her glasses at Alice, who was still kneeling at her side.

"Oh yes, of course. Please do," she replied eagerly.

"I think that you are by no means the first girl Reginald was in love with, or that was in love with him."

"Oh, but I know I was," cried Alice with assured confidence; "he told me so, over and over again," she added with a lovely blush.

"Stuff!" replied Miss Fane, viciously spearing her ball of worsted with a knitting-needle. "And you believed him, you little goose! Do you think," she proceeded in a cool ironical tone, "that an extremely handsome young man like him has lived seven years in the army without as many

love affairs to match? I tell you—and I am an experienced old woman—I tell you no, ten thousand times no. I can't say that I ever heard of any special affair. I did hear a whisper that when he joined he was one of the wildest of wild boys; but I believe, thanks to his father, he soon steadied down. But take my word for it, young men in the cavalry are a wild, bad lot."

"Do you mean—that—Reginald——?" cried Alice, struggling to rise.

"No, no, no," replied Miss Fane, keeping her down by laying her hand heavily on her shoulder. "Be patient, and hear what I have to say. I only mean taking them generally—no one in particular. Reginald," she resumed, "has spent a great deal of time abroad. Who knows," she proceeded mysteriously, and dropping her voice to a whisper, "but he may in some mad moment

have married a half-caste girl ; and then, tired of her, and ashamed of his folly, have bribed her to silence and left her in India ; and she, finding his second marriage too much for her fortitude, has sent you this certificate ! What do you think of that idea ? ”

“ Think of it ! ” cried Alice, jumping to her feet, and almost inarticulate with passion. “ I think it a very wicked, horrible idea to entertain of your own nephew, and you ought to be ashamed of it ! ”

“ So I will if this certificate proves a false one ; but if not, have you thought, my poor girl, since I must speak plainly, of the position in which it places *you* ? ”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I mean that if Reginald was married more than two years ago, as shown by the certificate, *you* are not his wife ; you are nothing but Miss Saville once more, with your name and fame for ever blighted.”

"How dare you say so?" cried Alice, crimson to the roots of her hair. "How cruel, how unkind of you to talk to me like this! I will never, never speak to you again as long as I live. You have a bad uncharitable heart," she added, moving rapidly towards the door. "What you say never, *never* could be true."

"Stay, stay," cried Miss Fane, following her briskly; "I would not have said all this if I had not—if I did not *love* you, and if I had not altogether your good at heart. You surely do not think it can be pleasant for me to doubt my own nephew?"—but it was very pleasant—"I only want to open your eyes, my poor dear child, in case of the worst. There is no one to perform this very disagreeable, thankless duty, except myself. I mean all for the best, I do indeed," taking Alice into her bony embrace and kissing her effusively. Alice, on the

verge of hysterics, her brain reeling, gladly escaped upstairs, to lock herself into her own room for the remainder of the day, where she had ample leisure to digest and understand Miss Fane's ideas.

Miss Fane, as we have already seen, had no love for her nephew, and, as far as the certificate was concerned, he was already tried, found guilty, and condemned, in her opinion. A domestic tragedy, such as this promised to be, was her glory and delight. Slander and gossip of all kinds were as the breath of her nostrils ; her letters, thoughts, and conversation all turned in that direction; and she was an adept at serving up the most delicate dish of scandal, accompanied by sauce piquante, and followed by entrées of her own suggestions. She had the worst opinion of the world and everybody in general, an opinion she prudently kept to

herself. An affair in her own little circle, such as this was likely to be, would afford her materials for conversation and letters for an indefinite time. It would give her a certain importance, too, to say : “I was in the house at the time when it all happened; I saw and heard everything with my own eyes and ears.”

She had no respect for her nephew’s name—*she* was not a Fairfax—no pity for his young wife. The excitement of a *cause célèbre* in her family caused her neither shame nor horror; quite the reverse. She knitted the heel of a stocking; made an excellent lunch off fish cutlets, curried fowl, tarts, and cream; took an airing in the pony-carriage; and awaited Geoffrey’s return with imperturbable mien.

“Alice would return to live with her,” she reflected, “if this turned out as she imagined; and she would make her a

handsome allowance, say three thousand pounds a-year, as before. Brighton or Cheltenham would suit her best ; she loathed the country, and would be able to give nice little dinners, card-parties, and suppers, and keep a brougham and pair—bays or grays—iron-grays looked dashing ; mulberry livery and silver buttons, and of course a cockade—it looked so smart. Perhaps a victoria, too, for summer.”

Here her castle-building was interrupted by the entrance of Alice, watch in hand —Alice, who had not tasted a morsel all day. She had spent hours alternately pacing the room and reading her husband’s letter ; at one moment revived with hope, at another sickening with despair, according as her own convictions or Miss Fane’s came uppermost. Pale, but composed, she drew near the fire, and mechanically spread

her hands towards the blaze. "Have you dined yet, Miss Fane? I am very sorry to have left you alone, but really my head ached so badly there was no use in coming down. Geoffrey will be here in ten minutes if the train is punctual."

"Then in ten minutes you will know your fate," said Miss Fane, laying her knitting down and looking at the clock.

"Oh, it's sure to be all right," replied Alice bravely, but white as ashes to the very lips; as steadying herself by the mantelpiece, she kept her eyes fixed on the door.

Miss Fane's favourite motto, "Hope for the best, prepare for the worst," was suddenly curtailed by sounds in the hall.

Geoffrey's face, as he entered with a would-be cheerful look, spoke volumes, quite sufficient for Alice, who knew every expression of his familiar features. Her

dry lips tried to form a question, but no sound came from them.

“Alice!” he abruptly blundered forth, “they say it’s a correct copy, and all that sort of thing. There is no use concealing the truth. Mark and I are certain that Reginald will clear it all up; it’s some frightful mistake, but nothing more. I swear it is not,” he said, taking her icy cold hand. “Don’t you fret yourself about it,” he added earnestly, for Alice’s white face and stony fixed expression alarmed him not a little.

“A correct copy did you say?” screamed Miss Fane. “Good heavens, what an unprincipled wretch Reginald must be! It’s well his father and mother are in their graves. My *worst* fears are confirmed.

“Alice, my poor child,” turning towards her with outstretched hands, “you will always have a friend and guardian in me.”

But her future ward did not hear her ;
Alice was lying at Geoffrey's feet insensible.

Next morning Alice had a long interview with Miss Fane, who came to condole and reason with her. She was in bed, and utterly at Miss Fane's mercy. All her hopes were speedily nipped in the bud. Every loophole of excuse that during the night her busy brain had conjured up was speedily scattered to the winds by Miss Fane's common sense.

“There is no doubt about it *now*,” she urged ; “none whatever. You must brace up your courage, and prepare to act as a girl of spirit. No doubt you have a terribly hard task before you, and you have been cruelly deceived ; but for the honour of your sex—not to speak of your own good name—be firm. He will declare • the whole thing a lie from first to last,

and will try to soothe you down with fond words and caresses, so as to gain time to act; for doubtless this certificate will give him a very unpleasant surprise. He will spare no money, you may rest assured, to silence the other person—Fanny Cole, in short. I daresay he would bribe her with half his income, so as to keep you as his wife; but do not listen to him. Be firm; in fact it will be best for you not to see him, but to leave the house before he arrives. You and I can live together as before. At first we will go to some quiet spot until this dreadful affair has blown over, as I suppose you will not wish to take any legal steps against him?"

"Oh, Miss Fane!" said Alice—who had not heard a quarter of what Miss Fane had been saying—suddenly sitting up in bed and pushing back her hair behind her ears, "is it not a bad dream? Have I .

been a little off my head? It *can't* be true. It *is* a dream!" she said, administering a severe pinch to her round white arm, from which she had pulled back the lace-ruffled sleeve. But as she watched the vivid red mark slowly dying away, she fell back on her pillow with a gesture of despair. "No dream—no dream," she said half to herself; nevertheless, Miss Fane heard it.

"I am sorry to say it is no dream, but a very sad reality. If you will take my advice, Alice"—and here Miss Fane paused—"Yes?"

"You will leave this to-day, and not await your hus—I mean," correcting herself, "Sir Reginald's return."

"Oh, I can't, I won't. I must see him once more!" cried Alice excitedly. "He is so clever, so clear-headed, he is *sure* to be able to unravel this horrible mystery."

“Humph!” said Miss Fane, with a scornful sniff, “it will take a cleverer man than I take him to be to do *that*. A marriage certificate is not to be explained away, or what would be the good of one?”

“But someone else may have forged his name,” persisted Alice; “may have been married in his name two years ago.”

“They could hardly do that, as the chaplain must have known him by sight. And look at the chaplain’s own signature, recognised and sworn to by his solicitors.”

“A forgery perhaps.”

“Nonsense. What could be anyone’s object? What would they gain? If you will persist in shutting your eyes to plain facts, *I* cannot help you. I am certain he will declare the whole thing a falsehood, and talk you over, in which case I must warn you that all respectable society will drop your acquaintance. This is by no



means the first event of the kind in *my* experience. The same terrible scandal occurred in the Loftus family only two years ago. Mr. Rupert Loftus married one of the Darling girls, and shortly after the marriage another wife, married in Jersey years before, came on the scene. Quite a parallel case to yours. I must say I gave you credit for more self-respect than to imagine you would cling to a man who is another woman's husband."

A crimson blush dyed Alice's throat, face, and ears; indignant tears started to her eyes; she tried to speak, but no words came, and, turning her head, she buried her face in the pillow, motioning her tormentor away with her hand. Miss Fane, finding it impossible to carry on conversation with the back of a small shapely head and a huge coil of golden-brown plaits, took her knitting and her departure.

She went, but she left a shaft behind her that rankled deeply. “Another woman’s husband!” The thought was maddening! Not hers? Nothing to her any more; and he who had told her over and over again that he had never loved anyone but her! “You little witch,” he had said, “you made me break all my resolutions, for I had not meant to marry for years and years, and, thanks to you, find myself at five-and-twenty a married man, with the prettiest little wife in England.” How could he—how dared he talk like this, and he already married?

Towards the afternoon Alice submitted to be dressed, and took some tea and toast, but remained all day in her own room. She spent a long time sitting in one of the windows, with her hands listlessly crossed in her lap, and thinking profoundly. As she watched the gray rain drifting across

the park, uppermost in her thoughts was Miss Fane's parting speech.

Over and over again her lips framed the unspoken words, "Another woman's husband."

She paced the room restlessly from end to end. Suddenly a thought struck her as she arrested herself at the door of her husband's dressing-room. She had never been in it. She slowly turned the lock of the door and entered. It corresponded in size to her own; but oh, how different to that luxurious apartment! It had a cold unoccupied feel, and she walked across to the dressing-table on tiptoe, for some mysterious reason she could not have explained. There was a small photo of herself in a stand occupying a post of honour; a large old-fashioned prayer-book, which she opened—"Greville Fairfax, from his wife," was written in a faded delicate

Italian hand, on the first leaf; a familiar breast-pin was sticking in the pin-cushion; a familiar coat was hanging on a peg. How near he seemed to her now!

Her eyes, roving round the room, took in every detail. Two old-fashioned wardrobes, a battalion of boots, a bear-skin and two tiger-skins spread on the floor, a couch, a small brass-bound chest of drawers, and a few chairs. Over the chimney-piece hung his sabre, surmounting a fantastic arrangement of whips and pipes; the chimney-board itself bristled with spurs. Above the sabre, spurs, and whips was a small half-height portrait of his mother, evidently copied from one in the dining-room—a lovely dark-eyed girl, in a white satin dress and fur cloak. Alice stood before the picture for a long time.

Reginald had his mother's eyes, only

that his had not such a soft expression. Yes, certainly his eyes were like his mother's.

"And what is it to me?" she thought with a sudden pang. "What would his mother think of him if she could but know?" she said half aloud, fixing her eyes on the picture as if expecting an answer from those sweet red lips. "What would *my* mother think if she knew all?" she said, burying her face in her hands. Then suddenly raising her eyes, she looked once more round the room and walked to the door.

"Good-bye," she said aloud. "Good-bye, the Reginald Fairfax I loved, that was everything to me in the wide world. Good-bye," she repeated, softly shutting the door. "As for the man who is coming to-morrow, he is nothing to me; he is—oh, shameful, shameful thought!—

another woman's husband!" and throwing herself on her knees beside her bed, she sobbed as if her heart would break.

After a while she rose more composed, dried her eyes, stifled her long-drawn sobs with an enormous effort, and said to herself aloud :

"I have done with tears; I have done with weakness; I have done with *Alice Fairfax!*"

CHAPTER VI.

“A WELCOME HOME.”

ENDUED in a decent semblance of composure, but pale and hollow-eyed, Alice came downstairs the following evening in time to receive her husband. She, and Miss Fane, and Geoffrey were sitting in the drawing-room, silent and constrained: Miss Fane bolt upright and knitting aggressively; Geoffrey making a feint of reading *The Field*, but in fact merely turning over the paper aimlessly from page to page, and surreptitiously watching Alice above its margin; Alice, with her hands

clasped listlessly before her, making no pretence of any employment, but staring intently into the fire with a hard, defiant expression on her face. Suddenly a loud ring, and a sound of footsteps and cheerful voices in the hall, announced the return of the master of the house.

Sir Reginald entered, looking radiant. "You hardly expected me so soon, did you?" he said, greeting his relations in turn. "I travelled straight through without stopping, except for a couple of hours in Paris. I have brought you the most lovely Christmas-box you ever saw!" he said, turning to Alice.

"Why, what have you been doing to yourself, my dear girl?" he exclaimed suddenly, struck by her altered appearance. "Have you been ill?" he asked anxiously.

"No," she returned shortly.

"Then what is the matter?" he pro-

ceeded with a smile, inwardly amazed at his wife's strange manner, and at the tepid reception she had accorded him.

"Has the cook, our priceless treasure, given warning?"

"Something *dreadful* has happened, Reginald," replied Alice. "I don't know how to tell you," she added in a low voice.

"I know!" he returned cheerfully, nodding his head towards Geoffrey. "He has killed one, if not two, of my best hunters?"

"Something far worse than that," she rejoined, staring glassily at her husband.

"Can you not guess what it is?" put in Miss Fane with venomous *empressemant*, having hitherto restrained herself by an enormous effort. "I wonder the roof has not fallen on you," she continued,

invoking the chandelier with a supplicatory gesture, and casting up her flint-gray eyes.

"Please leave us, Aunt Harriet," interrupted Alice, struggling hard for composure. "I must speak to—to—Reginald alone." And turning her back to the company to conceal her emotion, she moved towards the fire.

Sir Reginald gazed from one to the other in speechless amazement, then walking to the door he flung it open for Miss Fane, who left the room with ill-disguised though stately reluctance, throwing a warning but wholly unnoticed glance towards the figure in front of the fire.

Geoffrey, as he passed out, significantly whispered: "Mind, my dear fellow, I don't believe a word of it; I stand by *you*, through thick and thin."

"Stand by me in what?" muttered Sir Reginald to himself as he closed the door. "Have they all gone mad?"

"Well, Alice, my darling," approaching his wife, "what is all this about?" putting his arm round her waist and drawing her towards him.

"Don't dare to touch me!" she cried fiercely, pushing him away with both hands.

"Are you rehearsing for private theatricals?" he said with a laugh; "and am *I* to be the villain of the piece?" Then continuing more seriously, taking his wife's hands in his and looking straight into her eyes: "Alice, tell me at once—what is the meaning of this?"

"I'll tell you," she replied hysterically, snatching her hands away and searching in her pocket with nervous haste.

"What is the meaning of this?" pro-

ducing the anonymous letter. "It came three days ago."

He read it slowly, frowned, crushed it into a ball, and flung it into the fire.

"There! *that* is my opinion of it," he said, turning towards her. "You would not wish me to believe that you could be influenced by an anonymous letter, written by some crawling reptile too cowardly to attempt to substantiate his lies. I hold the writer of such a production" (pointing to the blackened fragments now lazily sailing up the chimney) "no better than an assassin who stabs in the dark."

"*This*, at any rate, is not anonymous," replied Alice, pushing the certificate towards him.

He took it up, read it, turned it over, and read it again. She observed that his face was a shade paler, but otherwise he was perfectly composed, as he said: "*This*

is a most infamous forgery. I know no one of the name of Fanny Cole, and I need hardly say I never was married before."

"And is this *all* you have to say?" inquired his wife.

"All! Good heavens, Alice! what more can I say? I assure you most solemnly I was never married to anyone but you; you know it as well as I do myself. I never met a woman I cared to speak to twice till I saw you that evening at Malta. What is the good of repeating the same old story over again—just now, at all events—when we have such heaps of things to say to each other? As to this infamous certificate, I will take good care to have it thoroughly investigated, and the whole thing cleared up, you may rely on that. It is my affair altogether; do not trouble your little head any more about it." Drawing her towards him—"Come, are you not

very glad to see me? Have you no better welcome for me than this? Do you know that I have been counting the very milestones till I reached home; and now I *am* here, won't you say you are glad to see me, my dearest?"

Alice leant her head against his shoulder; she was weak, she knew it; he was talking her over, as Miss Fane predicted; every word he uttered found an echo in her heart —her heart that was beating suffocatingly. She trembled from head to foot. On one hand was love and everything that made life dear to her; on the other, honour, duty, pride. She must make her choice between right and wrong.

"Speak, Alice!" interrupted her husband, getting a little out of patience at last.

"Yes, I'll speak," she returned in a hard mechanical voice, abruptly releasing herself and standing before him. "Do you know,"

she continued, with slow distinct utterance, “that that certificate” (pointing to where it lay on the table) “has been shown to a firm of solicitors?”

“Indeed!” replied Sir Reginald, in a tone of much surprise. “At whose suggestion?”

“Miss Fane advised me. Geoffrey and Mr. Mayhew took it to a firm they could rely on.”

“Well, I really think you might all have waited for my return before taking such an important step,” said Sir Reginald with some indignation. “I wonder *you* allowed it, Alice. It did not show much confidence in me, I must confess. And what did the solicitors say?” he proceeded, in a cool displeased tone.

“They said——” and she paused; then continued with an effort—“they said it was a true copy!” raising her eyes to his.

“A true copy!” he echoed. “I never heard such nonsense in all my life—*never!*” he exclaimed emphatically. “When there is no original, how can there be a copy?”

“I am not clever enough to argue with you, Reginald; you must ask the solicitors, they will explain. At any rate, they swore to the clergyman’s signature; he was a client of theirs, and they knew his writing well.”

“Mr. Parry’s writing is it?” said her husband, again taking up the certificate and critically scanning it. “So it is!—an admirable forgery. Poor old fellow, he was garrison chaplain at Cheetapore. I knew him well; he has been dead these two years.”

“Probably,” persisted Alice, “the fact of his being dead does not refute *that*,” pointing to the paper in her husband’s

hand. "According to its testimony it is nearly three years since you were married."

"Three *months*, you mean," he exclaimed with a laugh, making a desperate effort to throw off a horrible suspicion that was stealing over him and turning every vein to ice.

"Someone has forged Mr. Parry's name, that is evident," he exclaimed; "but why or wherefore I am at a loss to understand. I wish I had been here when this precious document arrived," he continued, pacing about the room. "It must have given you rather a start getting it in my absence. No wonder you look pale, my poor little wife," he said, pausing opposite her and looking at her steadfastly.

"No wonder, indeed!" she replied significantly.

Something in her look and tone con-

firmed his former conviction. Gazing at her fixedly for some seconds, he said :

“ It is not possible that you doubt me, Alice ? ”

Dead silence.

“ Answer me at once,” he demanded sternly, as she stood dumb before him. “ Do you hear me, Lady Fairfax ? ” he persisted, exasperated by her silence.

“ You can hardly expect *Lady Fairfax* to hear you,” she replied in a cool, chilly voice. “ She is not here.”

“ You will drive me mad, Alice,” he cried vehemently ; “ you could not in your heart believe this monstrous invention. I solemnly swear to you—you alone are my wife ; you *know* it is the truth. Why do you torture me like this ? If I thought you really doubted me, as sure as you are Alice Fairfax I would never forgive you ! ”

"Then you are taking a very weak oath ; for it seems to most people who have seen that paper that *I* am not Alice Fairfax. Show it to whom you will, they will say that *I* am not your wife."

"Is that *your* opinion ?" he asked sharply.

"It is," she replied boldly ; "I have no other alternative. I have been thinking a great deal the last two days—thinking more than I ever did in all my life before, and I can come to no other conclusion than that you *were* married to that woman. Your aunt entertains no doubt of your infamy, neither do I."

"Alice, am I mad ? am I dreaming ? or do I really hear you distinctly tell me that you are no longer my wife, and that *you* entertain no doubt of *my* infamy ? Am I out of my mind, or are you ? Am I still asleep in the train, or am I in my

waking senses?" he said, looking at her fixedly with his keen dark eyes.

"Whether you are mad or not I cannot say," she retorted scornfully. "I hope you are sane enough to understand that I leave this house to-morrow, never to return. For the future, you and I are *strangers*."

"This is mere childish folly," returned her husband angrily; "you don't know *what* you are saying. Because Miss Fane has been wicked enough to put all manner of hideous ideas into your foolish head, you are ready to run away like the orthodox heroine of a three-volume novel.

"Do you suppose?" he continued very gravely, "that I shall permit you to take the law into your own hands like this, or suffer you—a girl in your teens, a three-months' wife—to leave your home in such a manner? Is *this* the way you keep your wedding vows——"



“Wedding vows!” interrupted Alice, hastily pulling off her ring and tossing it on the table, where it spun for a second, and then collapsed into silence. “Wedding vows! I’ve none to keep! I am free! Show that certificate to whom you will, even to the most ignorant, and they will say, that whoever may be your wife—I am not——” She paused for a moment, half choked. “And not being your wife, you can scarcely expect my father’s daughter to remain *here*. You are a hypocrite,” she continued, speaking rapidly and trembling with excitement. “A hypocrite! for you appeared to be all that was good; and I know you to be all that is bad—— It *was* bad, wicked, shameful,” stamping her foot, “to deceive an orphan confided to your care.”

She paused again, breathless.

“Pray go on, madam—do not spare

me," said her husband hoarsely. He was leaning one elbow on the chimney-piece. Indignation, horror, and scorn were chasing each other in his eyes.

"You married me," resumed Alice, "or rather *pretended* to marry me, because I was your ward. It was an easy way to solve *that* problem, which must otherwise have been a trouble and a bore. I was young, rich, and, if *you* were to be believed, exceedingly pretty—nothing could be more suitable; but why did you forget that you had a wife in India? Had you not better bring her home? Her position may not be properly understood at Cheetapore," with withering contempt.

Smash went a valuable, a priceless old chimney ornament, thanks to Sir Reginald's restless elbow.

"I shall go away to-morrow, say what you will, and never see you again as long

as I live. You may hush the matter up ; you may say that I am dead. You have nothing to fear from me. I have neither father nor brother. In years to come I may forget you, and I may forgive you ; but should I live to be a hundred, I will never see you or speak to you again."

She stopped abruptly, and looked at her husband with glowing angry eyes. She had relieved the pent-up feelings of her heart in a perfect torrent of reproach. Her utterance was so rapid as to be almost inarticulate, and the tide of her passion carried all before it. With a motion to Sir Reginald to permit her to pass, she was preparing to leave the room.

He by this time was as white as a sheet, otherwise a vein down the centre of his forehead alone betrayed emotion.

Whilst Alice was shaking with excitement, he was perfectly cool and self-

possessed; but a kind of repressed sound in his voice when he spoke would have told a bystander that his temper was now thoroughly roused, and that *he* was by far the more incensed of the two.

“Lady Fairfax,” he said with emphatic distinctness, “permit me to delay you for one moment,” interposing himself between her and the door. “I quite enter into your wishes. The sooner we part the better. I will have no wife who suspects and despises me. A woman holding such views of my character I have no desire to see again. A wife who is ready to cast me off on the smallest and most unfounded suspicion—who does not even grant me a chance of proving my innocence—but tries, convicts, and condemns me unheard, is no wife for *me* except in name. I shall make all arrangements for

your comfort, but I cannot bring myself to discuss them now. You can remain here till our future plans are arranged. Your father's daughter occupies the same position beneath this roof as did my mother, although you may pretend to think otherwise. Had I been as wise a year ago as I am *now*, your father's daughter would never have been my *wife*."

Taking up the certificate and the ring, he turned and walked out of the room without another word.

On his way across the hall he was way-laid by Geoffrey, who sprang on him from the billiard-room and seized him by the arm, saying :

"Well, Rex, I suppose she has told you?"

"She has," replied Reginald, shaking

him off impatiently as he entered the library and threw himself into an arm-chair.

"I don't believe one word of it, mind you, Rex ; and as for Alice, she is nothing but a silly girl, with a hot temper. It all blows over. I know her rages well," he added consolingly.

"Don't talk to me now, there's a good fellow," returned Sir Reginald, jumping up and pacing the room. "Run down and tell them to bring round 'Dragon' and the dog-cart, and to put in my portmanteau just as it came."

"Why so, in the name of all that's mad ?"

"I'm off to London by the mail."

"Are you in your sober senses, Reginald ?" exclaimed Geoffrey, looking at him aghast.

"I scarcely know," he returned, wearily passing his hand across his forehead; "but I am quite certain of one thing, and that is, that Alice and I have parted for ever."

CHAPTER VII.

WESSEX GARDENS.

IT is needless to say that all this excitement upstairs had created no small stir in the lower regions. The servants held a court of inquiry on it over their meals, and discussed the subject in all its bearings and from every point of view. Susan Parker, lady's-maid, examined and gave evidence that on Tuesday night she was called to her lady, who was in a dead faint in the drawing-room ; that the two following days she had kept her room, refusing to

eat or drink, save a very little toast, or tea ; and that she sat all day long looking as if she was crazed, with her hands clasped idly before her, and that she, Susan, had surprised her more than once reading a letter and crying bitterly.

John Scott, groom, gave evidence that by order of Markham, the coachman, he had driven the dog-cart over to meet his master by the eight-o'clock down train. That Sir Reginald was never in better spirits in his life, asked him how they were all at home, talked of going to the meet at Copperley Gate next day, and drove along at his usual spanking pace, smoking a cherooot, as happy as you please.

That an hour after they got home, as he was at his supper in the servants' hall, Mr. Geoffrey had come down and beckoned him out, and told him to be ready with the dog-cart in ten minutes, as Sir Reginald

was going up by the mail. That when he was ready at the side door, his master had come out, shaken hands with Mr. Geoffrey, and driven away as if the Old Boy himself was after him.

They were just in time for the train, and Sir Reginald jumped out and tore off, leaving his portmanteau and rug behind him.

It was agreed on all hands that there had been an awful row between Sir Reginald and Lady Fairfax, but they were obliged to return a verdict of "Cause not known."

The following morning Reginald called at the Mayhews', and found them at breakfast.

"By Jove, my dear fellow, how seedy you look!" exclaimed the Honorable Mark. "I suppose you had it roughish in the Channel?"

"No; I arrived yesterday, and went straight to Loooton."

"Then you had it roughish there instead," remarked Mr. Mayhew with a grin.

"Mark, I have come to speak to you about this," said he, producing the certificate and handing it over to him. "You don't believe it, do you?" he asked anxiously.

"Not I; no more than if it were myself," said Mr. Mayhew, pausing in the act of voraciously devouring a grill. "I stand by you, Rex."

"And you, Helen?"

"And I also, Regy. Although appearances are against you, I believe in you firmly. You need not have asked," she added, sipping her tea and speaking between every sip.

"I really wish you would sit down and have some breakfast instead of standing

on the rug in that uncomfortable way
Have a cup of tea at any rate, and we'll
talk it over together."

Her woman's heart was touched by his haggard wan face. He looked as if he had not slept for nights, and although his "get-up" was as studiously correct as ever, there was a careless, reckless air about him that half frightened her. He looked like a man on the brink of a brain fever.

"Nothing for me, thank you. If I were to swallow a morsel it would choke me just now. I need not assure you, Mark and Helen, that the certificate is a most wicked forgery. I never heard of, much less married, Fanny Cole, nor anyone but Alice Saville. I must unwittingly have made some bitter enemy to bring down on myself such diabolical vengeance, uprooting my home and estranging my wife."

“Alice believes it then ?” they cried in one breath.

“Yes, so she has told me. She declares she is no longer my wife, and will never see me again. She means to leave Looton and live in remote retirement with Miss Fane, where, reversing the Elizabethan valediction, she will do her best to forgive and forget me.”

“Reginald !” said Helen with wide-open eyes, “you are joking.”

“Do you think this a subject for jests ?” he said sternly.

“Did you not reason with her ?” asked his cousin vehemently.

“I did ; I assured her of my innocence, on my word of honour. I reasoned with her as temperately as I could, till she nearly goaded me to madness. I could not trust myself to tell you what she said ; but she concluded the interview by flinging

me her wedding-ring. Here it is," said he, taking it out of his waistcoat-pocket and laying it on the table between them.

At this tangible proof of the rupture they both stared in silent consternation. Presently Helen said :

"I need not tell you, Regy, how young and inexperienced she is—not yet eighteen. Make allowances for her, for she naturally received a great shock, and has been ill-advised by Miss Fane, whom, you know, I never could bear. Do not be hasty in taking Alice at her word ; you know she is very fond of you."

"If you had been present last night you would scarcely have said so," returned Sir Reginald dryly ; "but I have written to her this morning to say that, if she changes her mind, a line to the Club will find me for a week. She may have been carried away in the heat of passion to say more

than she thought or meant. After a week it will be too late; I shall accept the liberty she offers me, and return to my profession. Fortunately my papers have not gone in yet. Now I must be going. You shall see me this day week."

"Nonsense, man, you are coming to stay here."

"No, Mark; many thanks to you. You would find me a restless, unbearable inmate. In a week's time I shall have settled down and grown more accustomed to my fate—if fate it is to be. Meanwhile, I shall spare neither time nor money to find out the author of this certificate, scoundrel that he is!"

"Reginald, I am sure a man never sent it," said Helen. "I'm sorry to say it of my own sex, but it's safe to be a woman."

"My dear Helen, if you knew how very

small my circle of lady acquaintances in India was you would not say so. I don't think so badly of your sex. Good-bye."

The allotted week having elapsed, Sir Reginald found himself once more in Wessex Gardens, this time to dinner. He was no longer the pale half-distracted man we had last seen him. He looked quiet and self-possessed, as if his fate had overtaken him, and he had submitted to it without a struggle. There had been no letter from Alice; his plans were fully formed, and he would unfold them after dinner—this much he imparted to Helen as he escorted her downstairs.

During dessert the children came in—Hilda, aged six, and Norman, eight—both delighted to see their special favourite, Uncle Regy. But Uncle Regy was very slow this evening—no stories, no paper boats, no rabbits on the wall. True, he

took Hilda on his knee, gave her all his grapes, cracked walnuts for her, with the reckless profusion of a young man, not an experienced paterfamilias, and finally carried her up to bed. But even the children could see that something was amiss, and told their nurse that Uncle Regy never laughed nor showed his nice white teeth once, and they thought he must be sick, he looked so solemn.

"Now," said Helen, as she poured out coffee, "let us have it all. What have you been doing, Regy?—and what are you going to do?"

"I have placed the certificate in the hands of a first-rate detective, for one thing; I have written to the chaplain at Cheetapore; and I have effected an exchange from the Fifth to the Seventeenth Hussars—now in India—and go out with drafts early in February."

"Oh Regy, to India again so soon?" said Helen with tears in her eyes.

"Yes," affecting not to observe them. "Is it not a good thing now I have the Service to fall back on? After all, India is not half a bad place for soldiering, and we are sure to have a row out there ere long."

"But why leave this country? Why not stay at home?"

"Because it will the more effectually muzzle Mrs. Grundy. It will be less marked than if Alice and I both lived in England and kept up separate establishments."

"But would you?" asked Helen in an awe-struck tone.

"Certainly. Alice has stood to her guns, and as 'Trust me all in all, or not at all,' is my motto, we should never get on. As a married couple our

career is finished. I remember hearing a cynical old bachelor say that the marriage service, instead of being the prelude to happiness and harmony, was almost always the ceremony that inaugurated a long and arduous campaign, a series of skirmishes, varied with numerous pitched battles. Alice and I have had one desperate engagement, and both vacate the field. We live to fight another day, but not with each other! Our married life was a short one—barely four months—and I find myself once more a bachelor; for as Alice declares she is not my wife, and as I equally solemnly declare that the other is not my wife, I conclude I am single. What do you think, Helen?"

"I think you are talking a great deal of nonsense, my dear Regy, and though you rail at matrimony now, in your heart you know very well that the last four

months were the happiest of your life. You need not deny it, and if you did it would be useless. Go on," waving her fan imperiously, "go on ; tell me what you are going to do about Alice."

"Of course she must bear my name and live in my house, but that will be the only tie between us. Unfortunately I am her guardian, a post I would willingly relinquish ; but it is out of the question to do so. However, my solicitor will manage to represent me as much as possible. I do not intend to be brought personally into contact with Alice, much less with Miss Fane, who has fanned the flame with all her might, Geoffrey tells me."

"And how have you managed ?"

"I have opened an account in Alice's name at Drummond's, and made her an allowance of five thousand a-year.

Her own money she cannot touch till she is one-and-twenty, excepting five hundred a-year, which her father very wisely thought ample for a girl in her teens."

"Then why increase it?"

"My dear Helen, where is your common sense? Alice will have an establishment to keep up befitting her position as a married woman. I intend her to live at Monkswood, which has always been a kind of dower house. I shall shut up Looton, dismiss most of the servants, and send all the horses up to Tattersall's on Saturday. I am going abroad for a month previous to returning to India, and start for Vienna the day after to-morrow. Now I think I have told you all my plans; have you any exception to take to them?" he inquired, drinking off his coffee and setting down his cup.

"I know you of old, Regy," replied Mrs. Mayhew with a sigh. "Your asking me if I take exception to any of your arrangements is only a Chinese compliment; once you make up your mind nothing will alter it, so there is no use wasting words. I think you ought to stay at home instead of going to India. I think you ought to insist on bringing Alice to her senses; or suppose you allow *me* to take her in hand? Let her come here on a visit whilst you go out to Cheetapore and investigate this horrid business thoroughly."

"No," replied Reginald coldly; "Alice and I are strangers for the future. You will oblige me very much, Helen, by referring to her as seldom as possible. She thinks me a hypocrite, a deceiver, a thoroughly bad man. Such were her own words. She could not think worse of me

if I were the greatest scoundrel that ever walked this earth."

"Reginald, I am sure she does not," pleaded Helen.

It was in vain she begged him to reconsider his decision. He listened to all she had to say with a kind of contemptuous tolerance.

"Very kind of you, Helen, to take her part in this way; very good of you to defend her; but, as you yourself remarked just now, it is only a waste of words."

One has a good opportunity of studying Sir Reginald Fairfax as he stands on the rug looking down on Mrs. Mayhew, who, leaning back in the easiest of chairs, is slowly fanning herself.

Tall, slender, and graceful, his well-cut evening clothes fit him and suit him admirably. "Gentleman" is stamped on

every line and lineament, and there is a leisurely ease and deliberation about everything he says or does ; the repose that stamped the line of "Vere de Vere" is not wanting in the Fairfax family. His eyes are the most striking feature—so dark, so cool, so keen, they seem to read one's thoughts like a book, to penetrate one through and through. His delicately-chiselled high-bred nose (to particularise each feature impartially) and proud sensitive nostrils he inherits from a long line of ancestors. Do not dozens of similar profiles adorn the walls of the gallery at Loothon ? There is a certain look about his well-cut lips—barely to be guessed at beneath his dark moustache—that to a close observer indicates a resolute, not to say imperious, disposition ; and something altogether intangible in his

bearing points out the soldier. A handsome, dark, daring face one could easily imagine leading the headlong hurricane of a cavalry charge.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. MAYHEW'S LITTLE SCHEME.

MRS. MAYHEW was most decidedly the clever woman of the family. Not only had she brains, but an unusual allowance of common sense, and a kind heart to boot. She was dark and good-looking, like most of the Fairfaxes, and inherited no small share of their force of character and determination. Having no brother of her own, she had always appropriated her cousin Reginald as such, since he, at the ripe age of six, had made impassioned love to her, a grown-up young lady of seventeen. She

absolutely ruled all the men of her family (husband included) with a mild and gracious sway, always with the notable exception of her cousin "Regy." His head had never yet bent under her yoke, and he had the audacity to differ from her on many vital subjects, and held the heresy that "it was for man to command, woman to obey, all else confusion." Nevertheless he possessed a place in Mrs. Mayhew's heart second only to that occupied by her husband and children.

Mrs. Mayhew was never happier than when she was managing other people's affairs, for which she had a singular aptitude. To do her justice, she meddled with the very best intentions, and her hands were always full. She was the confidante of lovers' quarrels, of matrimonial differences untold : from the servant out of place to a girl jilted by her intended,

all came to Mrs. Mayhew, and to them she lent a ready ear, her sympathy, and assistance. Her only serious trouble was her rapidly-increasing tendency to *embon-point*, and she sighed when she ordered each new dress to be made with an increasing width of waist. Her weakness, her particular pet vanity, were her hands and feet; and certainly she had every reason to be proud of them:

“Tell Helen she has the prettiest foot in London, and she’ll ask you to stay for a month,” was one of Geoffrey’s impudent remarks; and he also declared that knitting, to which she was much addicted, was merely a framework supplied by her vanity, in order to flourish about and show off her hands.

She was sitting at the fire one dripping February afternoon knitting the following thoughts into a stocking:

"This is the 8th. Let me see" (referring to a paper on her knees), "the *Alligator* sails on the 26th. Not much time to be lost. I must make one desperate effort to try to reunite this wretchedly headstrong young couple. I'll take Norman down to Southsea next week for change of air for his cough, and once established in our old lodgings I can easily carry on operations."

Here her husband entered, and she laid her plans before him.

"Go to Southsea, my dear, by all means, but whatever it may do for Norman's cough, I don't think it will be of much use as far as Alice and Reginald are concerned. There is no answer yet from the army chaplain. The detectives are no wiser than we are ourselves. Besides which, that old scorpion, Miss Fane, has Alice talked out of all her senses by this time, be sure."

"But I anticipate a great deal from an unexpected meeting, nevertheless. I'll get Alice over from Sandown to spend a few days, and 'you shall see what you shall see.' You know that she and Miss Fane are there, and have taken a house till April."

"Please yourself and you please me ; but I have a conviction that your little plot will be no go. Reginald's temper is like what the Irish cook said of your own : 'That you were a good Christian lady, but when you were *riz*, you *was riz* ;' and he is very much *riz* indeed."

"Well, I can't wonder at it, I must say. You would have been, to say the least of it, *annoyed* if I had, after being married to you a few months, called you a hypocrite and deceiver, and left you, after throwing you my wedding-ring ; you knowing yourself to be entirely innocent of any blame all the time."

"Yes, very true; but no such volcano as this certificate ever burst out in your home. Pray what would you have done, or say you would have done, in such a case?"

"I would have trusted you, Mark."

"Humph" What an extraordinary amount of unbelief a grunt can convey.

"Ah well, perhaps you would. Such trust is, however, much easier in theory than in practice. Make some allowance for Alice, poor girl, although we all know she is in the wrong. It's a bad business —a bad business."

So saying, he opened his paper with an impressive rustle and buried himself in the news of the day.

A fortnight had passed. The Mayhews were domiciled at Southsea, and Alice had come over to stay with them for a few

days after an immense amount of coaxing, and finally being “fetched.” She was as deaf as an adder to all Helen’s eloquent reasoning and remonstrances, and even Mark was out of patience with her at last. She had been primed by Miss Fane with answers to every argument, and had given her her most solemn promise never to yield an inch until the certificate was thoroughly disproved. There had been a letter from her husband to Helen, saying he was coming down on Monday to bid “Good-bye,” as he was to sail the following Thursday ; and he mentioned that he wished to have an interview with his wife, so that her being on a visit at the Mayhews’ was most convenient. She was not told of his probable arrival, in case it should scare her away. She knew that he was shortly going to India, but where he was, or when he was going, she had no means

of knowing, and was too proud to ask, and Helen was far too angry with her to offer any gratuitous information.

On Monday afternoon Helen and Alice were sitting in the drawing-room, the latter pouring out tea at a low gipsy table, and looking very fair, girlish, and lovely in a thick black *damassé* silk of most artistic cut, with lace ruffles at her throat and wrists. Helen, lounging opposite in a capacious armchair, was reading aloud tid-bits from *The World*, and occasionally glancing towards the door.

Norman and Hilda, with scrambling feet and buttered fingers, were making Alice's life a burden to her; and she was by no means so tolerant of these young aggravations as her husband would have been.

"More sugar; more sugar, Alice!" cried Norman, passing a very sloppy cup recklessly towards her.

“No, my dear Norman ; I gave you two lumps.”

“Give me another two, for I have fished them out and eaten them. Come, look sharp !”

“Norman !”

“If you don’t I’ll take that arrow out of your hair and pull it all down, and you’ll see how nice you’ll look if visitors come.”

“If you do——” began Alice indignantly. Just at this crisis the door opened and admitted Mark, Geoffrey, and Reginald.

The children made a violent charge towards the latter.

“Uncle Regy, Uncle Regy ! where have you been all this long time ? What have you brought us ?” they cried, leaping and dancing expectantly round him.

Alice glanced up hastily. He was shaking hands with Helen. What was she to do ?

Would he shake hands with her? Yes; in another second she found her hand in his; and then he turned to the children.

"Give me a cup of tea, Alice," said Geoffrey, drawing a chair close to the tea-table, and staring at her with a very unpleasant critical scrutiny.

Her hands trembled so violently she could hardly hold the teapot; the colour sank from her cheeks, and her heart beat so fast it seemed as if it would choke her; but she made a brave struggle for self-command, and endeavoured to converse easily and indifferently with Geoffrey whilst her husband was talking to Helen. Presently she stole a look at him; he was standing on his favourite place—the rug—and she met point-blank the steady glance of his keen dark eyes, fixed on herself—a look full of interest, yet grave and stern.

She felt her face becoming crimson, and dived under the table for her handkerchief, glad of an opportunity of composing her countenance. Dare she take another look ? No, she dare not.

At this moment visitors were announced, and the bustle consequent on their arrival was the greatest relief.

Enter two fashionable ladies with a cavalier in tow. Reginald evidently found favour in the eyes of one of them ; he had the unmistakable air of a man of birth and distinction. She therefore proceeded to make herself most agreeable, and put him through a series of animated questions, giving him a pretty good benefit of her eyes all the time. Alice, looking on, felt indignation burn within her ; and yet, why should she mind ? he was nothing to her ! He had destroyed her life, as far as her happiness went. All she valued was gone.

Bravely indeed did she try to sustain a share of conversation, and to keep up appearances to the best of her ability. She knew she was answering the strange young man's remarks at random, but she could not help it. He was looking intensely puzzled, as well he might, when she told him that "she was staying in *India*, but had come over to Southsea for two or three days." Oh, if she could only get out of the room! No sooner thought than done. She was gliding quietly towards the door, when her husband with two steps confronted her.

"Alice," said he, "I wish to speak to you particularly. Can you come out with me and take a turn on the pier?"

Alice bowed her head in assent, and passed on. When she came down in her walking things—close-fitting velvet paletot trimmed with superb sable, and cap to

match—she found him waiting in the hall. Having ceremoniously opened the door for her, they set out, and walked on rapidly, exchanging the veriest commonplaces. The pier was evidently to be the scene of action, so Alice braced up all her nerve for the encounter, and firmly determined to abide by Miss Fane's advice, and not yield an inch till the certificate was utterly refuted.

No one meeting them would have guessed at the storm that was raging in their hearts. They did not look like married people, nor lovers certainly. “A young fellow taking his very pretty sister for a walk, most likely,” would have been the verdict of a passer-by.

Arrived at the pier, Alice summoned up all her courage, and taking a good long breath and a firm grasp of her umbrella, said, with apparent composure: “Now what have you to say to me?”

"Several things as your husband, and a few as your guardian," he replied, leaning against the railing and looking at her intently.

"Say nothing to me as my husband, but whatever you have to say as my guardian I will perhaps attend to."

"Then you still entertain the monstrous notion—that I am *not* your husband?"

To this question Alice made no reply, and he proceeded. "Well, I *am*, all the same. But I see it would be a waste of time and temper to endeavour to persuade you otherwise. I have every reason to believe that within the next two months all will be satisfactorily cleared up. May I ask what you will do in that case?"

"I will return to you as your wife, of course," she replied calmly.

"And do you suppose that I will receive you then? Return to me *now*—show, even

at the eleventh hour, that you can trust me—I will send in my papers and stay at home. I have interest, and it is not yet too late. I will freely forgive and forget all you thought, all you said. It shall be as though it had never been spoken.” He paused, and looked at her eagerly. “I told you,” he proceeded still more earnestly, “that I had done with you, that I had no desire to see you again, but I found, on cool reflection, that I loved you far too dearly to give you up without an effort at reconciliation. I have made *two*—once in London and once now—but this, I declare to you solemnly, will be the last. Come back to me, and trust me, my dearest,” he said, laying his hand entreatingly on her arm. “Trust me only for a little time; all will, all must come right. You will never again in all your life have such an opportunity of showing

your love, your confidence in me. Do you think I would not stand by you in a similar case? You know I would," he added emphatically. "Come back to me, Alice," he urged.

"No, I will not," she replied doggedly leaning both elbows on the railing of the pier and staring steadily out to sea.

"You will not?" he repeated, in a tone of bitter disappointment. "You cannot mean it." After an inward struggle with himself he continued as before: "Think of what you are doing, Alice. You have broken up our home and turned me adrift—taken your freedom and your own way. You are sending me back to India, and God knows if I shall ever return."

"You need not go," she replied in a low voice, still looking out to sea, as if addressing the ocean.

"Of course I must go!" he cried

emphatically ; “unless you wish to have the open mouth of scandal busy with our names. If the world knows that I am engaged in my country’s service it may leave you alone. But I warn you that society looks coldly on a young and pretty woman living apart from her husband, and rightly or wrongly, they almost always throw the blame of the separation on *her* shoulders. I know you have been influenced by Miss Fane ; I know you have. It was not my generous, true-hearted Alice that spoke to me that night at Looton. You don’t know how you pained me, how you nearly maddened me by some of the things she put into your mouth—things my pure-minded girl-wife would never have thought of herself. You could not seriously think that I had another wife living, and that I had dared, nevertheless, to marry you—an *orphan*, as you justly remarked,

committed to my care ! Think of the shameful crime it would be ! Look me full in the face, and tell me candidly, truthfully, and of your own free will, whether you imagine that I, Reginald Fairfax, could be guilty of such a thing ? ”

Alice turned round at once and confronted him—his face pale with emotion. His dark, miserable eyes haunted her painfully afterwards for many and many a day.

“ Clear yourself first,” she exclaimed, “ then I will listen to you. As long as that certificate is unexplained I will never return to you as your wife ; I will never, never see you again, as far as I can help it, until the whole affair is refuted. I am amazed that you should expect it.”

Sir Reginald gazed incredulously at his wife for a moment, as if he thought that his ears must have deceived him.

“Is this your last word?” he said in a voice husky with passion.

She nodded emphatically.

Exasperated beyond endurance, he left her side and walked to the other end of the pier alone. Presently he returned with firm rapid strides, and confronted her with a compression of the lips and a flash in his eyes she had never seen before. Coming to a stop, and standing directly before her, he said :

“That was *your* last word; now hear *mine*. I most solemnly take God to witness”—raising his hat as he spoke—“that I will never receive you back as my wife until you have made the most humble, abject apology that ever came from woman’s lips. You shall abase yourself to the very dust for the shameful injustice you have done *me*.”

"Shall I, indeed?" she exclaimed passionately. "You will never see a Saville abased to the dust. I will never apologise and never beg your pardon. Pray do not offer your forgiveness before it is required."

"Very well," he replied coldly, "there is no more to be said, as you declare that you will never apologise, and I have sworn to yield to no other terms. We shall live for the future as strangers, excepting that I shall exercise over you—even though at a distance—the authority of your guardian till you are twenty-five."

"I shall not submit to your authority!" she interrupted hotly.

"Oh yes, you will," he returned in a cool unmoved tone. "You have as yet to learn that I too have a will—that I am your master—no longer your slave. I am aware

I cannot flatter myself that you either love or honour me," with ironical emphasis, "but you will certainly *obey* me."

"I shall *not!*!" she cried indignantly.

"Oh yes, I am quite sure you will," he replied in the easy authoritative tone with which one talks to a naughty child. "You will live at Monkswood," he proceeded tranquilly. "It is smaller than Looton, but I hope you will find it as comfortable. Horses, carriages, and servants will precede you there, and I hope all will be ready for your reception in a fortnight's time. In the meanwhile I must beg you will remain with Helen, as I do not wish you to return to Miss Fane. I forbid you to see her or to correspond with her." He paused to see the effect of his words, then continued: "Your own aunt, Miss Saville, has been good enough to promise to reside with you permanently,

as it would be out of the question for you to live alone."

During the above long speech Alice had been gazing at her husband with amazed indignant eyes. Drawing herself up as he concluded, she said :

"And supposing I decline to leave Miss Fane and to go to Monkswood, what are to be the dire consequences ?"

"You have no other alternative," he replied with freezing politeness. "Unfortunately for your independent spirit, all your money is in my hands."

"What a shame !" she cried passionately.

"Yes, is it not ?" he answered with a satirical smile. "A young lady with an empty purse, and utterly cut off from her friends, would find herself rather embarrassed, to say the least of it."

"Miss Fane will allow me to live with her as before," she returned confidently.

"When she finds that you are absolutely penniless, I think you will discover that her interest in you has ceased," he replied significantly.

"Must I go to Monkswood? Must I?" she asked passionately.

A bow was her reply.

"I suppose I am completely in your power?"

"I am afraid so," he answered composedly.

"Oh, if anyone else were only my guardian! If your father had lived, or if he had chosen Mr. Mayhew."

"I sincerely echo both your wishes, but I hope you will be able to reconcile yourself to circumstances. You will go to Monkswood, I am sure."

"I suppose I *must*—for a time at least," looking at him defiantly.

"Very well," he replied, ignoring her

look, “we will consider the matter settled. Mark Mayhew and my solicitors will look after your interests. Personally, I will have no communication with you. This is our last interview; from to-day we are strangers.” After a pause he went on: “You will hear from Helen whether I am dead or alive; if the former, you will be freed from every tie—you will be your own mistress, an exceedingly rich widow, with no one to control you in any way. Should you marry again, as no doubt you will, I sincerely hope your second venture in matrimony will be more fortunate than your first.”

“Reginald!” she exclaimed indignantly.

“He will have to be a different sort of fellow to me,” he continued, without noticing the interruption; “to have a pretty thick skin; to give you your own way completely; and to have no self-

respect whatever. Of course *that* will be a *sine qua non*. He must not mind your changeful moods, nor be offended, if after telling him he is dearer to you than words can express, and making an utter fool of him, you turn on him at the first breath of suspicion and call him a hypocrite, a deceiver, a ruffian of the deepest dye, and altogether a most infernal scoundrel."

"Reginald, I never used such expressions. How *dare* you speak to me in such a way! How dare you treat me so!" she exclaimed, raising her voice, much to the amusement of two sailors, the only other people on the pier, who were lolling over the railings close by, and had been watching the scene with unaffected delight.

"She's giving it to him. By Jove, Bill, that chap has his hands full!" said one of them, turning his quid. "If he is going to venture out on the sea of matri-

mony with that craft, he'll happen to have heavy weather frequent and squalls every day."

"What do you mean by bringing me here to ridicule and insult me?" repeated Alice in a towering rage. "The marriage certificate is still unexplained, and you talk to me as if *you* were the injured person—*you!*"

"I am glad to see that you have grasped my meaning," he replied coolly. "I *am* the injured person; suspected by you, who should be the last to doubt me—homeless, wifeless, nevertheless innocent. I am leaving my native land, this time a voluntary exile. You have destroyed my faith in womankind: a woman's word—a woman's love—a woman's generosity are to me now merely so many names for delusions believed in by children and *fools*. I brought you here to tell you

of various arrangements I had made. I preferred a personal interview to letter-writing; besides which, I am sure you will be amused to hear that I had a lingering hope you would have believed me and trusted me, even at the eleventh hour—a hope I now see,” looking at her steadily, “that I was mad to entertain.”

“ You were indeed insane to think it,” exclaimed Alice very emphatically. “ Prove the certificate to be a forgery, and then I will believe you,” she said abruptly, turning to leave the pier, with a scarlet flush on either cheek and a general air of outraged dignity.

They walked homewards, that cold, dusky February evening, in solemn silence. Alice’s conscience was clamouring loudly as she stepped briskly along, endeavouring to keep up with her husband’s rapid strides. He seemed totally unconscious of her

presence. Buried deep in his own thoughts, he did not vouchsafe a single remark between the pier and the Mayhews' house.

"God forgive you if you have wronged him," said Alice's inward monitor. "He is going away to the other end of the world, and you may never see him again."

"But the certificate—the clergyman's signature so far undenied and unrefuted," argued Pride and Propriety.

Helen, who had been expecting great things from this interview, met her cousins in the hall on their return. One glance at Alice was sufficient to dash her hopes to the ground—she looked the very picture of frigid resolution as she placed her umbrella in the stand, and with some trivial remark about the lateness of the hour walked straight upstairs to her own room, where she remained all the evening, pleading a bad headache as an

excuse from dinner. Nor was her husband a more hopeful subject ; declining all his cousin's entreaties and persuasions to remain, at any rate, till the last train, he took his departure forthwith, Helen promising him, as she followed him to the door, that they would *all* come and see him off the following Thursday. Her inquiries and hints were in vain ; no particulars of the walk to the pier were vouchsafed to satisfy the cravings of her curiosity. "We are just where we were before we ever met—we are strangers," was the only intelligence gleaned from her cousin as he selected a cigar, buttoned up his top-coat, and bade her good-night.

CHAPTER IX.

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM.

THE day of embarkation arrived only too speedily. It was a persistently pouring wet morning, rain descending in torrents. It cleared a little towards the afternoon, and the Mayhews, accompanied by Alice, started in a close carriage for Portsmouth Dockyard. They had insisted on her accompanying them, saying that, if she did not, it would give rise to a great deal of unpleasant discussion among their friends, several of whom lived at Southsea.

"It is only fair to Reginald," urged Helen. "He has not had time to clear himself yet, and at any rate before the *world* you will have to keep up appearances. How you can allow him to go—how you can doubt him, I cannot imagine. You will be exceedingly sorry for yourself some day," she added in a lower voice, accompanied by a look of keen-edged meaning quite lost upon Alice, who was staring vacantly out of the window.

They soon arrived at The Hard, Portsea, and descried the huge white *Alligator* lying alongside. The most frightful confusion prevailed on all sides, and the noise and din and pushing and shoving were beyond description. Baggage bewailed as lost; baggage going on board; soldiers' wives, who were being left behind, in loud lamentation; friends who came to see

people off, rather cheery and important than otherwise ; friends who were really sorry, and on the verge of tears ; dogs being smuggled on board ; dogs being turned out ; wherever you looked there was bustle and confusion ! The Mayhew party gingerly ascended the long and slippery gangway, and asked for Sir Reginald Fairfax.

“ Yes, he was below, God bless him ! ” said an Irishwoman, who was wiping her eyes with the tail of her dress. “ It’s many a sore heart he has lightened this day.”

“ How so ? ” inquired Mrs. Mayhew graciously.

“ Hasn’t he given ten pounds to every woman that’s not on the strength, and is left behind, meeself among them—and me wid three childer ? May the heavens be his bed ! may he never know sickness or grief ! May he never know what it is to have as

sore a heart as mine is this day ! May the Holy Virgin protect him ! ”

It was in vain they tried to stem this torrent of blessings ; the woman would not let them out of her sight.

Addressing herself specially to Alice, she said :

“ Maybe you’re his sweetheart, or his sister, alannah ! His sweetheart, I’m sure ? ” she urged insinuatingly.

“ No, neither,” replied Alice, blushing furiously, and making a wild and at last effectual effort to reach the top of the saloon stairs, leaving the Irishwoman still pouring benedictions on her husband’s head.

The long saloon was full of artillery, cavalry, and infantry officers and their friends, but Reginald was not there after all ; so, under the escort of a polite naval officer, they again went on deck, where they found him in the fore part of the

ship, giving orders to a smart saucy-looking sergeant, with his cap on three hairs, who was receiving his directions with many a "Yes, sir; very well, sir."

Sir Reginald was now junior major in the Seventeenth Hussars, and uncommonly well he looked in his new uniform. He received Mark and Helen warmly, Alice politely, and as though she were some young lady friend of Helen's, and nothing more. He offered to show them over the ship, now they were there, and took them between decks, pointed at the soldiers' quarters, the live stock, the engines, etc. Alice, under convoy of the naval officer, walked behind her husband and the Mayhews, but her mind was in far too great a ferment to notice or admire the order, discipline, spotlessness of the magnificent trooper.

She answered her exceedingly smart

escort utterly at random as she mechanically picked her steps along the wet decks, the said young sailor thinking her the prettiest girl he had seen for many a day, and that her feet and ankles were the most unexceptionable he had ever come across. He made a mental note to find out who she was and all about her.

As they passed a group of weeping women, he remarked : "They may well cry, poor creatures, for many a fine fellow will sail to-day that will never see his native land again."

"Oh, please don't say that," said Alice, her eyes filling with tears.

"Why not? Are you very much interested in anyone on board?" he asked with a smile meant to be tender and captivating.

"My husband," she faltered.

"Your husband!" he cried thunderstruck. "Are you married—you look so

awfully young? Is that your husband—that young hussar fellow ahead with your friends?"

Alice, whose tears were now quietly coursing down her cheeks, turned and leant over the side in silence.

"Is he?" he repeated.

She nodded impatiently, still further averting her face.

"Oh, but a strong-looking fellow like that is sure to come back all right," said he, offering her the first piece of clumsy comfort that came into his head, and much distressed at the flow of tears that kept drip, drip, dripping into the sea.

"By Jove!" he thought, "what an odd couple they are! They have never spoken to each other yet, for all this grief."

Meanwhile the Mayhews and Reginald had turned and come back towards them, and were much edified to find Alice leaning

over the side, apparently studying the sea, and a young sailor seemingly whispering soft nothings into her ear. *This* was a phase of her character that burst upon them for the first time. She remained quite motionless till they had passed, then dried her eyes and followed them below. They went down to the main deck and saw Reginald's cabin, which he shared with another officer. Some loving hands had done up the stranger's side with many a little comfort—a thick quilted crimson counterpane, pockets for boots, and combs, and brushes against the wall, and the netting over his berth crammed with new novels. All these caught Alice's eye, and she felt a sharp twinge as she turned and saw her husband's share of the cabin bare of everything save such luxuries as the ship provided.

“ You are all going to stay and dine with

me," he said, "at the ghastly hour of half-past four, but it will take the place of five-o'clock tea for once. And if you like to make a toilette," addressing himself to Helen, "here are brushes and combs at your service, and I'll take care that the other fellow does not intrude."

"But won't it seem very odd if we stay?" asked Helen, dying to do so.

"Not at all. About twenty ladies are dining besides yourselves; so look sharp, the first bugle has gone."

He treated Alice as an utter stranger; and Alice, now that he was really and truly going, began to realise what she was losing. Regret, remorse, and love were getting the better of pride, obstinacy, and suspicion. Miss Fane's influence was gradually wearing away in Helen Mayhew's society. She choked back the blinding tears that would come into her eyes, and bit her quivering

lips, so that Helen might not see her tardy sorrow. Helen was calmly titivating herself at the glass, and did not observe her companion's emotion.

"Come, Alice, be quick!" she exclaimed at last. "Take off your jacket, child; your serge will do very nicely. Here, wash your face and brush your hair; you look quite wild and dishevelled."

Alice mechanically rose to obey her. "What a dandy Reginald is," she proceeded. "I had no idea he was such a fine gentleman: ivory-backed brushes with monograms, and all his toilet accessories to correspond—boot-hook, button-hook, shoe-horn, all complete. Let's see what his dressing-case is like inside."

"Oh don't," cried Alice piteously; "he hates to have his things rummaged, I know he does."

"What nonsense, my dear girl," opening

the case. "Here, have some white rose—hold out your handkerchief."

"No, thank you, I would rather not."

"Ridiculous goose, afraid to have it because it is your husband's! Listen to me, Alice," she said more gravely, putting her hand on Alice's shoulder; "he *is* your husband as sure as Mark is mine. Say *something* to him before he goes. Promise me that you will. There! there's the dinner-bugle. Now mind," opening the cabin-door hastily and speaking to Alice over her shoulder, "it will be your last chance."

They found Reginald waiting at the foot of the stairs to escort them to dinner, where he sat between them at the captain's table. Quite a number of ladies were present, but not one to compare with Alice in appearance. Many an admiring eye was turned again and again to the lovely slight girl

sitting next Fairfax. A lisping sub, who was at the opposite table, after gazing at her for nearly five minutes, gave utterance to the universal query, "Who is she ? "

"I say, who the deuce is that pretty girl sitting next Fairfax ? She is uncommon good-looking."

"Don't know, I'm sure," returned his neighbour ; "his sister most likely. She is downright lovely. Such a nose and chin, and sweet kissable little mouth ! "

"You had better not let Fairfax hear you, my dear boy. Maybe she's his wife."

"Wife ! That girl ! You can just step upstairs and tell that to the marines."

"I would give a trifle to know who she is," remarked a third, upon whom a brandy-and-soda had had a most reviving effect.

"I can tell you," said Alice's acquaintance, the naval officer, who had just come down and seated himself at the end of the

table ; "she is the wife of that young fellow next her."

"What nonsense ! He is not married."

"Oh yes, he is," observed a hitherto silent youth, who had been devoting himself ardently to his dinner, and who now plunged into the discussion pending the arrival of the second course. "He *is* married, but he and his wife have had no end of a shindy, I hear ; that's the reason he is going abroad. Just look at them now, as grave and as glum as if they were at a funeral."

"What a pity it is that marriage is so often the grave of love," remarked a cynical little artilleryman, putting up his eyeglass and staring across at the other table. "They are an uncommonly good-looking couple, anyway. The fellow reminds me of Millais' 'Black Brunswicker,' only he is darker."

So saying, he languidly dropped his glass and resumed his dinner.

The moment of parting came, and the general feeling was that the sooner it was over the better.

Putting on their hats and jackets, Alice and Helen hastened on deck; Alice's heart thumping, her knees trembling, and her face as pale as death. Here they were joined by Mr. Mayhew and Reginald, who were having a few last words.

"Come along, Helen," said Mark, taking her arm and leading her down the gangway, good-naturedly intending to give the other couple a moment to themselves; but if it had been to save Alice's life she could not have uttered a syllable. She intended to have said something —what, she scarcely knew—but her dry

lips could not frame a sound, and they reached the carriage in dead silence.

“Good-bye, Mark! Good-bye, Helen! Good-bye, Alice!” said her husband hurriedly.

Alice turned on him a wistful glance, but a cold farewell was all she read in his stern dark eyes. In another second he was clanking up the gangway, a vision of a dark-blue uniform, a close-cropped brown head, and he was gone; and Alice leant back in her corner of the carriage, and gave way to a passion of weeping no longer to be restrained.

CHAPTER X.

GEOFFREY SPEAKS HIS MIND.

ALICE remained at the Mayhews' for ten days, previous to going to Monkswood. She was very quiet and subdued in public, but in private her feelings were not so well under control. If the walls of her room could have spoken, the good folks down-stairs would have been amazed at some of their revelations. They could have told how Alice flung herself on her bed the night the *Alligator* sailed, and wept the bitterest tears she ever shed.

"If he *is* innocent," she said, "he will

never, never forgive me. What have I done? I have had the happiness of my life in my own keeping, and thrown it away with both hands."

Leaving Alice stretched on her bed, perfectly worn out and exhausted with crying, her face buried in the pillows to stifle her sobs, let us follow the *Alligator* and see how her husband is getting on.

They have rounded Finisterre, and are having, if anything, rather worse than the usual Bay weather. Tremendous Atlantic rollers are tossing the *Alligator* about as if she were a huge toy. Now she yaws over, down, down, down to this side, now she slowly rights herself from an angle of at least 40° , and goes over to that. They are having a very bad time of it no doubt, for it has now commenced to blow, not half but a whole gale. All

but those whose duty it is to remain on deck have gone below—all but one tall figure in a military great-coat, who is standing under the bridge, and keeping his equilibrium as best he can, considering that he is a *soldier*.

He seems perfectly insensible to the lurching ship, the torrents of water sweeping the decks, the whistling of the wind through the rigging, and the weather-beaten sailors' anxious faces. *Seems* so only ; in his heart he is saying:

“If this goes on she will founder. It will be a terrible thing for all these poor fellows and their friends at home, but a rare piece of good luck for *me*.”

However, the *Alligator* did not go to the bottom, thanks to Providence, rare seamanship, and her own sea-going qualities—but that she never was out in anything that tried the latter so thoroughly

was admitted by the oldest salt on board.

Geoffrey escorted Alice down to Monkswood about a fortnight after her husband had sailed. The carriage they occupied was empty; for the first part of the journey they had it all to themselves. Geoffrey thought this an excellent opportunity for giving Alice what he called "a little bit of his mind," so, having arranged himself and his rug to his complete satisfaction, in the seat facing hers, and sticking his eyeglass firmly in his eye, he commenced :

"*You* are a nice young woman, I must say. I have the worst, the very worst possible opinion of you."

"You can't think how grieved I am to hear you say so," said Alice, looking up from *Punch* with a complacent smile.

"It's no smiling matter," he replied

angrily, “you heartless, obstinate little—little—I don’t know what to call you.”

“Don’t hesitate to relieve your mind; you have generally a fine command of language. Pray don’t let my feelings stand in your way.”

“Well—*vixen*, then—a little vixen!—allowing your *husband*”—with much emphasis on the word—“to go out of the country in this way: the very best, the nicest fellow in the whole world. His little finger is worth ten of you. Letting him go when a word would have stopped him. The idea of a chit like you”—with scathing contempt—“having it in her power to control a fellow’s movements! Now you have sent him to that white man’s graveyard—India—I hope you are satisfied?”

“There was no occasion for him to go.”

“Every occasion, once you had taken it into your head to leave him. You

could not both live at home, and apart, without no end of a scandal—a young couple barely out of their honeymoon. Even now there are whispers, I can tell you ; but, as everyone knows Rex to be a red-hot soldier, the row that they say is going to come off out there will be sufficient excuse to most ; few will guess the real reason of his leaving England—an obstinate, credulous, heartless wife."

"Really, Geoffrey, you have the most astounding assurance ! What next, pray ?"

"One great comfort to me is," proceeded Geoffrey, removing his glass and leaning back with folded hands, "that when this tremendous lie is found out, and squashed, everyone will be down on you like a thousand tons of bricks. I am quite looking forward to it, I can tell you," rubbing his hands. "Thank goodness you are not *my* wife, that's all."

"To be your wife!" she exclaimed contemptuously, "what an alluring idea! Why not suggest Norman at once?"

Geoffrey's youth was his tender point.

"I am glad you are not my wife," continued Geoffrey, perfectly unruffled by her interruption. "I remember you as a small child, a horrid, cross, cantankerous little monkey, flying into awful tantrums and rages for nothing at all. You bit me once, I recollect, my young lady."

"I'm sure I never did," cried Alice indignantly.

"Pardon me; I have every reason to remember it. Your teeth were as sharp then as your tongue is now. You asked my pardon, and said you were very sorry, and all that, and I forgave you. Query, will Reginald forgive you for the nice trick you have served him? What pos-

sessed him to marry you is a riddle I have given up long ago. However, if anyone can break you in to trot nicely and quietly in double harness, Reginald is the man. He stands no nonsense, as I daresay you know by this time, madam."

"Have you done, Geoffrey?"

"Not quite yet. Supposing he is killed out there, or is carried off by fever or cholera, how will you feel? The chances are fifty to one against his ever coming home. If he does not, his death will lie at your door as surely as if you had murdered him."

Now Alice, whatever fear she had of Helen, had no awe of Geoffrey, and whatever she might suffer from self-reproach, had no idea of being taken to task in this way by him.

"One would think, to hear you talk,

Geoffrey, that you were the injured party. Pray what business is it of yours, my kind and complimentary cousin? If you could contrive to mind your own affairs and leave me to manage mine I should feel obliged," said Alice with much dignity, taking up *Punch* once more from her lap and casting a look of indignant defiance over the top of its pages at her irrepressible cousin.

"By rights you ought to be at school; you are barely eighteen—far too young to know your own mind; not that you have much mind to know," he added, crossing his legs and gazing at her dispassionately.

"Much or little, it is made up on one subject most thoroughly," returned Alice with an angry spot on either cheek. "If you do not cease these civilities and leave me in peace, Geoffrey, I shall get out at

the next station, and travel in another carriage."

"Here you are then!" he returned unabashed, as the slackening pace and large sheds full of rolling stock and network of lines betokened their arrival at a junction.

"This will do," said a high treble voice, and the carriage-door opened and displayed two very fashionable-looking ladies, a maid, a poodle, various monstrous wicker travelling cases, a varied assortment of small parcels, dressing-cases, umbrellas, and other light odds and ends. The party were under the charge of a stout, red-faced, irascible-looking old gentleman, who seemed by no means equal to the occasion, and was soon to be seen coursing up and down the platform, inveighing at porters, accosting guards, and altogether in a state of excitement bordering on delirium.

The two ladies, the poodle (smuggled), and many of the smaller packages found places in the carriage with Alice and Geoffrey; and after a time were joined by the old gentleman, frightfully out of breath and out of temper.

The presence of outsiders put an end to hostilities between our young friends, and their discussion was postponed to a more appropriate occasion. Alice even vouchsafed to accept a fresh foot-warmer and a cup of tea from Geoffrey's hands in token of a truce.

Although the month was March, it was still bitterly cold, and Alice shivered as they sped along through fields still brown, past curious old hamlets and farm-houses, with red high-pitched roofs or quaint black and white timbered walls; past dumpy little high-shouldered-looking village churches; past gray manorial halls

peeping through their still bare leafless woods; past flaming scarlet modern erections in the all-prevailing Queen Anne style; past scattering cattle and galloping long-tailed colts, at thundering express speed.

Alice saw but little of the landscape; her eyes were dim with unshed tears, that nearly blinded her.

Was ever any girl so miserably unfortunate, so wretchedly unhappy as herself? She had had to abide by principle and duty—to hold aloof from her husband till he could clear himself. But where was Reginald now? What was he doing? Could he but guess the awful blank he had made in her life? Supposing that Geoffrey's prediction came true! she thought, with a sudden contraction of her heart. What would she not give for one moment's glimpse of him now? Query, would

she have been happier had her wish been gratified ? The picture would unfold a hazy languid afternoon, the *Alligator* steaming down the glassy Red Sea twelve knots an hour ; the passengers enjoying a practical experience of the *dolce far niente*—some dozing in cane chairs or on the benches, their caps pulled over their eyes, gracefully nodding and coquetting with the fickle goddess Sleep ; some playing deck-quoits ; some endeavouring, spite of drowsiness, to interest themselves in a yellow-backed novel ; some playing draughts ; some smoking ; some one or two, “ though lost to sight to memory dear,” beneath a shady umbrella, in company with a lot of flounces and neat little steel-buckled high-heeled shoes.

Down in the saloon, half-a-dozen kindred spirits are drinking the cup that cheers etc., dispensed by the pretty little hands of a

pretty little woman, the wife of a colonel returning from a six months' European tour, charged with quantities of nice new dresses and a freshly-whetted appetite and zest for flirtation. She has helped to "get up" theatricals on board, and played her part to admiration ; she sings delightfully piquante French songs to an audience of enthralled fellow-passengers ; she tells amusing little stories about the other ladies in her cabin to her ravished listeners ; she treats everything as a joke—even Sir Reginald Fairfax amuses her. He avoids all the ladies, never speaks to them, and keeps aloof from the fair sex in a manner that stimulates her vanity and her curiosity alike. However, she has overcome circumstances, and by a propitiously-dropped book made his acquaintance, and finds that "he is altogether charming, and every bit as

nice as he looks." This she explains to the lady at the next washing-stand, as she dresses elaborately for dinner.

Sir Reginald is compelled to come to five o'clock tea—there is no escape for him—and he submits to circumstances with as good a grace as he can muster.

Behold the picture Alice would have seen, had second sight been vouchsafed to her : Pretty, very pretty Mrs. Wynyard, in a dressy pink cotton, pouring out tea at the end of one of the saloon tables for the benefit of two ladies and five gentlemen, who are all in the highest possible spirits, and discussing the lottery that they are getting up on passing Perim. Her husband is the object of Mrs. Wynyard's most marked civilities ; he has been deputed to cut the cake, and is fulfilling the task with wonderful skill and alacrity, and is laughing and talking with as much anima-

tion as anyone else. For the moment he has cast care behind him and closed his eyes to the past; and, indeed, care is but a sorry associate for a young man of five-and-twenty.

To leave the tea-party on board the *Alligator*, and return to Alice in the railway carriage, does not take us more than a second. Whilst her face is steadfastly turned away from the new arrivals, they have been regarding her with a long exhaustive stare.

"Who are these young people?" they ask themselves with the intolerance of people in their own county. "The girl is well dressed, and might be good-looking if she had more colour and not those dark rings round her eyes," was their mental verdict. These ladies themselves, attired in fashion's latest *hint* of fashion, by no

means disdained to bring art (and a good deal of art) to the aid of nature.

One of them was not merely rouged, she was *raddled*; and over her head fully forty summers had flown. Nevertheless, her sight was still eagle-keen, and on the strap of a dressing-case she deciphered a card and the name “Fairfax.” Electrical effect! Yes, “Fairfax” as plain as a pikestaff. Was this girl the young bride, the beauty, that there had been so much talk about? She must be.

And the youth. Was he her husband? That boy! Preposterous! If not her husband, *who* was he, and where was Sir Reginald Fairfax?

You may rest assured that she did not keep her discovery or her surmises to herself; and no sooner had Alice and Geoffrey left the train than she took her com-

panions into her confidence, and pointed out with emphasis the open carriage and imposing-looking pair of bays that were visible above the palings outside the station, and into which Lady Fairfax and her companion had just stepped and driven off.

Why did the bride come thus, alone ? Where was her husband ? Who was her escort ?

The rosy-cheeked lady lived within an easy distance of Manister, and she set the ball of rumour and conjecture rolling along so gaily and so speedily, that all the matrons within miles of Monkswood soon regarded Alice with feelings bordering on ferocity. In the first place, she had carried off the best *parti* in the county. This was bad enough ; but to be separated from him within three months of their

marriage, and to arrive on their hands as a very bad little black sheep, was surely beyond endurance. She had *nothing* to expect from their charity or generosity.

CHAPTER XI.

“EASTWARD HO !”

THE *Alligator* put in at Malta for twenty-four hours, and all the passengers landed and “did” the sights. Reginald, in company with some fellow-sightseers, visited the cathedral, the fried monks, and other noteworthy objects, and, sentimental as it sounds, he strolled past the house where he had first met Alice.

“Who would have thought,” he said to himself, “that that simple, unsophisticated girl would have turned out so hard

and unyielding? She had given him a bitter lesson; he had done with her and all womankind, that was certain ; ” but before he reached Port Saïd his heart was considerably softened.

The handsome young second lieutenant and he were constantly thrown together, and had become capital friends. They were partners at whist, and frequently played in the same game at deck-quoits. One evening they were standing in the stern, watching a large steamer passing in the distance, homeward bound, when the lieutenant abruptly broached the delicate subject of matrimony.

“ No one would think,” he said, critically surveying his companion, “ that *you* were a married man.”

“ Then you are not as clever as a friend of mine, who declares that he recognises a Benedict at once by the cut of his boots,

and could swear to his umbrella," said Sir Reginald.

"You haven't a married look about you," resumed the sailor, "no, nor your wife either. I never was more amazed than when she told me she was married."

"Indeed!" replied Sir Reginald stiffly.

"Yes, I put my foot in it rather; I *always* do if there is the slightest aperture for that extremity. Thinking her a girl come on board with her friends merely to see off some casual acquaintance, I told her that the chances were that many of those embarking would never see England again. A most happy remark, was it not?" observed the sailor emphatically.

"And what then?" asked his companion with averted eyes, busily arranging the focus of his opera-glasses.

"Oh!" she said, "don't, my husband is going;" and then she burst into floods

of tears. Such oceans I never saw ; how they poured down into Portsmouth Dock I shan't soon forget."

"Did she say that I was her husband ?" inquired Sir Reginald, looking at him searchingly.

"Yes, of course she did. You are, are you not ?" returning his gaze with wide-open curious eyes.

"I am," very shortly. "After all, that is not a P. and O. boat. Now she is close, you can easily see that she is one of the Messageries ; yes, you were right after all, and I was wrong," said Sir Reginald, changing the conversation and handing the glasses back to the lieutenant.

A few minutes later he moved away, and leaning over the bulwarks in a secluded spot he finished his cheroot alone. Somehow his heart felt lighter than it had done for a long time ; and when, some hours

later, he went below to his "horse-box," and found his own particular fellow-passenger asleep and snoring, he took out a cabinet photo of Alice, taken shortly after their wedding, and gazed at it long and earnestly. How happy she looked—how lovely! Infamously as she had treated him, there was no one like his Alice after all. He had the weakness to kiss the pasteboard and put it under his pillow, and in a few minutes was sound asleep.

The *Alligator* of course stopped at Port Saïd, that perennial abode of sand, flies, and dogs ; full of melancholy-looking empty cafés chantants, where the performers, ranged on the platforms, and all ready to strike up, appear to be only waiting for an audience, and audience there is none. The sandy streets were full of people—Jews, Turks, infidels, and heretics. The home-coming Anglo-Indian,

with stupendous mushroom topee swathed in a quarter of a mile of white puggaree, and armed with a large double-covered umbrella, passes the out-going "Griff," got up in pot-hat, dogskin gloves, cane, etc., with a stony stare.

But a very little of Port Saïd goes a long way with most people; and the *Alligator* passengers, having laid in a supply of eau-de-cologne, oranges, and umbrellas, with which to face the Red Sea, were not sorry to troop back on board to the welcome signal of the "dinner" flag.

They edged their way cautiously through the Canal, and bore down the Red Sea with wind and weather in their favour. The sky and sea were like Oxford and Cambridge blue; there was not a ripple in the water. The far-receding Arabian coast engaged the attention of at least a

dozen deluded opera-glasses looking out for Mount Sinai.

Oddly-shaped islands were passed, including the notorious "Brothers," so little above water and so much in the line of traffic, that more than one ill-fated steamer has borne down on them at full speed and sunk like a stone. Aden was left behind in due time, and after a pleasant breezy run across the Indian Ocean, one early morning Colaba lighthouse was descried in sight, and not long afterwards they were steaming majestically up Bombay harbour, and anchored off the Apollo Bund. To a new arrival, how bright and gorgeous and eastern it all looked !

The long low stretch of land, covered with white and yellow buildings of all shapes and sizes, set off with a background of green trees; rising here and there against the turquoise sky were palms lofty

and graceful, which alone made everyone realise that they were actually in the East at last.

The harbour was crowded with shipping. Steamers and sailing ships at anchor abounded on all sides; and flitting in every direction were native bunderboats plying between them and the shore. Fishing-boats, with enormous lateen-shaped sails, were spread up the harbour towards Elephanta. Even the grotesque junk was represented; and altogether the scene was novel and lively. And now for the moment of parting and disembarking on board the *Alligator*. None of the former were particularly tender, for there had been no very *prononcé* flirtations. In this respect the troopers pale before the P. and O., and those who were bound for the same station had generally herded together on the voyage out. There was wild work at

the railway station, but after awhile the *Alligator's* late freight were steaming along to their several destinations in Bengal, Madras, or Bombay.

Sir Reginald Fairfax and Captain Vaughan, Seventeenth Hussars, along with the draft in their charge, were forwarded to Camelabad; and after a wearisome three-days' journey, half-blinded with glare and smothered with dust, they found themselves (figuratively speaking) in the arms of their brother "Braves." The Seventeenth had only recently arrived in the station, and had barely shaken down into the quarters vacated by the outgoing "Guides," whose furniture, horses, and traps they had also succeeded to, after the exchange of sundry bags of rupees, as horses, traps and furniture, once settled at an Indian station, rarely leave it. An old *habitué* will say to a new arrival — a

bride most likely, and vain of her first equipage :

“Oh, I see you have got the Carsons carriage.”

“Oh dear no ; it is ours.”

“Yes, I know that, of course ; but it was the Carsons’, and before that it belonged to the Boltons, who got it from the Kennedys, who brought it from Madras.”

Camelabad was a lively populous station, large and scattered. There was always something going on. The hospitality of the Anglo-Indian is proverbial ; society, as a rule, pulls well together. The backbiting, scandal, and cause for scandal, so much attributed to Indian circles, is no worse out there than it is at home. The fact of being fellow exiles draws people together, and they are more genial to each other than in their native land.

But to return to Camelabad. It was certainly a very gay place ; dances, dinners,

theatricals, “At homes,” not to speak of polo matches, sky races, and paper-chases, succeeded each other rapidly. The Seventeenth Hussars were soon drawn into the giddy vortex ; they set up a weekly “function,” and gave a capital ball, and speedily ingratiated themselves with their neighbours. They went everywhere and did everything, “as people always do who have not long come out,” quoth the Anglo-Indian of thirty years’ standing with lofty contempt. They all went out with one exception, and he never mixed in society ; for which reason, strange to say, society was most anxious to make his acquaintance. The Seventeenth were repeatedly asked : “Why does not your junior major show ? Excepting on boards or courts-martial, he is never to be seen.”

“Why does he not come and call ?” a lady of high social position asked the colonel. “I want to have him to dinner. What makes

him so unsociable ? Such a handsome young man too ! I saw him at the review on the Queen's birthday. You must stir him up ! ”

“ I can't, my dear madam. I have tried to stir him up, as you call it, but it was no good. Nevertheless, he is a capital fellow ; first-rate officer ; keen sportsman ; and awfully popular with men. But I take it he does not care for ladies ; got rather a facer from one of them, I fancy.”

This having transpired, Sir Reginald became more interesting than ever to the public mind ; but as all invitations invariably met the same fate—a polite refusal—he was in time permitted to “ gang his ain gait,” and relegated to the ranks of the outer barbarians. He played polo with the regimental team, rode the regimental cracks in the sky races, and was looked on as an enormous acquisition by the Seventeenth, who considered him a

kind of Admirable Crichton in a small way, his riding, shooting, and cricketing being much above par. His personal appearance they regarded with undisguised complacency as a valuable adjunct to the average good looks of the corps; and he was installed in their opinion as an out-and-out good fellow and thorough gentleman.

“I used to be sick of hearing some of the Fifth fellows quoting Fairfax for this, that, and the other,” remarked one; “but, strange to say, their swan *is* a swan after all, and has not turned out to be that very toothsome but homely bird—a goose!”

With all his popularity, he was the last man with whom any of them would have taken a liberty. He would have been bold indeed who would have asked him why he left the Fifth Hussars, not to speak of a fine country place, magnificent shooting, and

ten thousand a-year, to lead a dull monotonous life on the scorching plains of India ? He would have been bolder still who would have inquired about the fair and exceedingly pretty girl, that Captain Vaughan had seen sitting next him at dinner the day of embarkation. Who was she ? Was she his sister or his sweetheart ? Someone said he had a vague idea that Fairfax was a married man ; but he was silenced and crushed by general consent.

Fairfax was a bachelor—crossed in love, if you will—but a bachelor *pur et simple*. Look at his bungalow—rigid simplicity. Look at his room—not a bit of woman's work, not a photo, not an ornament. A perilously narrow camp-bed, a few chairs, a portable kit, a writing-table, and a squadron of boots, and that was all. There were a few books, chiefly on cavalry tactics and military history, leavened with half-

a-dozen sporting novels ; not a French one among them. Anything but like the accepted idea of a smart young cavalry officer's lair. If, as they say, a man's room is a type of himself, Fairfax was a soldier, a rigid moralist, and above all a bachelor, and one who would no doubt develop into an old bachelor into the bargain.

Captain Campbell and Lieutenant Harvey were sitting in their mutual verandah, in long chairs, clad in costumes more conspicuous for ease than elegance, smoking, taking away the characters of their neighbours' horses, and minutely discussing the approaching big races. From horses they came to riders, and finally to Fairfax.

“He is one of the best fellows going, but I cannot make him out; he looks like a man with a story.”

"He does ; and he has one you may be sure," replied Captain Campbell with conviction, languidly puffing at his cheroot.

"If he was the life and soul of the Fifth, as we have heard, their ideas of mirth and jollity are more moderate than I could have imagined. Sometimes, I grant you, he is in fairish spirits, and he can say very amusing things ; but, as a rule, he is silent and *distrait*. It is certainly in field sports and on parade that he shines most ; brilliant sociability is not his *forte*."

"No, decidedly not ; and yet how all the fellows like him, from the latest youngster from home upwards ; although he is down upon the boys at times, and has the art of being more politely and unpleasantly sarcastic than anyone I know. One would think he was forty to hear him talk, he is so circumspect and staid ; and he can't be more than six or

seven and twenty at the very outside. The youngsters respect him as if he was the Commander-in-Chief himself; and the remarks at his end of the table are never so free as elsewhere. There must be some reason for his premature gravity. There's a woman in the case, depend upon it," said Captain Campbell, tossing away the end of his cigar with an emphatic gesture "*Cherchez la femme*, say I."

"I should not wonder. Probably he has been crossed in love—jilted perhaps," suggested Mr. Harvey.

"She must be uncommonly hard to please, whoever she is, for he is one of the best-looking fellows you could see—well-born and rich." Captain Campbell paused for a moment to reflect on these advantages, and then continued: "It is a curious thing that he never mentions a woman's name, and is altogether very close

about himself and his family. Do you remark that he takes tremendously long solitary rides, and gives his horses the most work of any man in the station, for he gallops often, he gallops far, and he gallops fast."

"He never seems to care to ride with anyone, don't you know." (Mr. Harvey put in "don't you know," on an average, every three words.) "I offered my agreeable society at various times, but he always put me off in that quiet way of his, don't you know; so I thought: 'My dear fellow, *saint* as we think you, you have some little game up, and I'll see what it is, don't you know.'"

"That will do, my dear fellow; that's the eleventh 'don't you know.' Stick to Fairfax," exclaimed his companion impatiently.

"Well, last Saturday evening, about

five o'clock, I saw him going out of his compound on that new black Australian of his; and as I was just going for a ride myself, I nipped up on 'Agag,' and struck out after him, on the sly naturally; and a nice chase he led me—for nothing too. He went easy enough till he got well out of sight of the cantonment, and then, by Jove, didn't he put the pace on! *Oculus meus!* how he took it out of the Waler. He rode slap across country as if he was mad, clean over every nullah, big or little, that came in his way. I had a hideous conviction that, if I followed him, especially on 'Agag,' I should come to a violent end, so I stayed in a mango tope, and kept my 'cold gray' on him in the distance. When he had galloped his fill, and exorcised whatever demon possessed him, he came back after a ring of seven or eight miles, with the

black all in a lather, but looking as cool as a cucumber himself. I joined him—quite promiscuously of course—but I fancy that he twigged he had been followed; there was a look in those keen eyes of his that made me feel deuced uncomfortable. I'm certain that he has something on his mind. A woman for choice. Maybe *he* threw her over, and she went mad, or drowned herself, or something, don't you know, and the pangs of remorse are preying on his soul, eh ?" cried Mr. Harvey, having talked himself breathless.

"A lively and cheerful idea truly," said Captain Campbell, sitting erect in his chair. "In my opinion it's far more likely that the girl of his affections has been faithless. He never talks of a woman, never gets a letter from one; his correspondents are all of the sterner sex—*vide* the letter-rack—and he keeps his own concerns religiously

sealed from every eye, and never talks of himself in connection with any belongings. He is a mystery, and a most interesting one. Why did he come out here? Why did he leave his old regiment, where he was so popular? What makes him so reserved and self-contained? I have watched him at mess, when all of you were listening open-mouthed to one of the doctor's stories. I have seen Fairfax, when he thought no one was observing him, lean back in his chair, with a sombre weary look, as if he were sick and tired of life. And that time when Vaughan had fever so badly, and he nursed him, I sat up with him part of a night. Vaughan was sleeping, and he remained in the verandah. I fell asleep too, and when I woke up a couple of hours later there was Fairfax in the very same attitude as I had left him, still gazing at the stars, and still apparently thinking pro-

foundly. I watched him for a good while before I spoke, and there was something indescribable in his face and attitude that made me feel very sorry for him, and I seemed nearer to knowing him that night than I had ever done before. Presently I said, ‘A penny for your thoughts, Fairfax,’ and he gave such a start as he turned round and said, ‘They are not worth it; they are merely about myself, and not very pleasant ones either,’ and then he got up and went back to Vaughan and stayed beside him the remainder of the night. He is one of the best fellows and most gentlemanly men I ever knew. But as to following him as you have done”—flourishing a fresh cheroot in the direction of his friend—“or ever trying to force myself into his confidence, I would as soon think of cutting my throat.”

“Did you remark him on Christmas

Day?" asked Mr. Harvey eagerly, as if struck by a sudden thought. "After dinner, when we all drank 'Sweethearts and wives,' how taken aback he looked. I was sitting opposite him, and he turned as pale as a sheet. He set down his glass untasted at first, but I remarked that he drank it off afterwards. There is a woman in the case, that's certain.—Chokra! bring me a brandy-and-soda."

This conversation took place nearly a year after Sir Reginald had joined the Seventeenth, and during that year two events of importance had occurred. I will relate them as they came. He had been several months at Camelabad, and had quite settled down to Indian military life, and was beginning to look upon the short time he had spent at home as a sort of fevered vision. He never heard from Alice. His only corre-

spondents were Mark Mayhew and Geoffrey, with an occasional note from Helen. He heard from her that his wife had shut herself up at Monkswood and declined all society, that her answers to their letters were rare and brief, and that her aunt, Miss Saville, had been laid up in Ireland with rheumatic fever, and would not be able to join her niece for some time.

This was all that he had gleaned about Alice since he had left home; consequently, when carelessly glancing through the *Home News* one mail-day his eye was caught by the following, "Fairfax—On the 10th inst., at Monkswood, Lady Fairfax, of a son," he was simply thunderstruck. He took the paper over to his own bungalow adjoining the mess and read the paragraph over and over again—it had an absolute fascination for him—but read as he would, it came to the same thing. It could not be her, it

was some other Lady Fairfax ; but scarcely of Monkswood also, his common sense urged. He felt a conviction that it was true, and yet he could not realise it. He a father—Alice a mother ! Well, at any rate, he was glad it was a boy. There was an heir to Looton now, whatever happened to him. His father would hardly have rested in his grave if the Fairfax money and acres had gone to the Serles and the good old name become extinct. Yes, he was glad that there was no chance of that now ; but as for Alice, he thought worse of her than ever. That he should know of their child's birth through the medium of a newspaper showed the contempt in which she held him. His dark cheek reddened as he angrily flung the paper from him and began to pace the room rapidly from one end to the other. He would take no notice whatever of the event, as far as Alice was

concerned. No, he certainly would *not* write to her. This was the resolution he came to, as he proceeded hastily to dress for mess, where he was, if anything, more silent and preoccupied than usual.

As he was going to bed that night he called his servant Cox into his room—a most exceptional proceeding. Cox was an old retainer, who had followed him from the Fifth, and believed implicitly that the sun rose and set entirely and exclusively in the person of his master the major. He alone was in Sir Reginald's confidence, and naturally a silent and taciturn man; touching his master's private affairs, he was mute as the grave.

"Here, Cox, I thought I would show you this," said Sir Reginald, holding out the paper and pointing to the announcement.

Cox saluted, slowly read the paragraph,

and stared blankly at his master; then recovering his manners and his presence of mind, said concisely:

"I give you joy, sir."

"Thank you," said Sir Reginald, pouring out a tumbler of champagne; "you are to drink his health and keep the news to yourself."

"Health and happiness and a long life," said Cox, quaffing off the toast as if it was spring water and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. After staring expectantly at his master for some seconds, and finding him evidently buried in his own thoughts, he added gruffly: "I suppose I may go now, sir." An eager nod of assent was his only answer, and he lost no time in backing himself out into the verandah, and hurrying off to his barrack-room in time to report himself before the bugles sounded the last post.

The following mail brought a letter from Mrs. Mayhew. She generally enclosed a little note in her husband's epistles, but this was a long effusion for a wonder.

"Monkswood.

"MY DEAR REGINALD,

"You will have already seen the birth of your son and heir in the paper, and no doubt were as much astonished as everyone else. For the last six months Alice has lived in the greatest retirement, seeing no one. Two or three times we have asked her to come up to us, and she always excused herself with one ridiculous plea after another. A telegram from the housekeeper last Tuesday brought me down here the same evening, and I found Alice very, very ill—so ill that for several days the doctors were afraid to hold out any hopes of her recovery. I

dared not write and tell you this last mail, but waited till this one, in hopes of sending you better news. Her youth and a wonderful constitution have pulled her through, and I may say that she is out of danger, though still extremely weak, and subject to prolonged fainting fits.

"The life that she has led for the last few months has been the chief cause of her illness. Morris tells me that she used to walk for hours through the woods in all weathers, and took so little food that it is a wonder she did not die of simple inanition. She never dined, but simply went through the farce of sitting at table breaking up breadcrumbs, sending away the most tempting delicacies untasted. Poor motherless girl, angry as I am with her, I cannot help being sorry for her; she is so innocent, so utterly inexperienced, and so alone in the world—thanks to her-

self of course. If she had been a trusting wife, how happy and proud you would both be now! She is so good and patient I cannot help loving her, in spite of myself. Her pride in her baby is simply ridiculous, and very touching to see. To hear her, you would think it was the first of its species, or at any rate that nothing so beautiful and so remarkable in every way had ever been born. A mother at eighteen, and looking even younger, I tell her that no one will ever believe the child is hers. She has about as much experience of babies as my Hilda—a baby with a baby. He is a splendid boy, a real Fairfax. If I were to declare that he is like you, you would say, ‘Rubbish, all babies are exactly alike!’ But he *is* very like you all the same. He is to be called Maurice, after her father, and Mark and I are to be sponsors. I have just asked Alice if she

has any message for you, and she has replied in a very low and subdued voice —*none*. I have no patience with her. I should like to take her baby out of her arms and give her *such* a shaking, only she looks so dreadfully frail and delicate —I really *would*. I need not tell you that now, more than ever, it behoves you to trace the false certificate. It is too provoking that you have not been able to get leave to go to Cheetapore and search personally. It is really a dreadful misfortune the register being lost, and the clergyman and clerk both dead ; but money can do a *great deal*, and you are the last man in the world to spare it. I will write again very shortly, and hope to have good news from you before long.

“Your affectionate Cousin,

“HELEN MAYHEW.”

Helen kept her promise, and during her stay at Monkswood Reginald heard from her regularly ; but neither line nor message was ever enclosed from his wife, so neither line nor message was ever sent by him. He did not even mention her name in his letters—letters which Helen could not refuse to Alice's wistful eyes—letters which Alice read with pale face and trembling lips, and returned without a single observation.

Two months later a bad attack of jungle fever procured Sir Reginald leave of absence. For months he had been like a bird beating against the bars of his cage to get away to Cheetapore, as letters, telegrams, and inquiries of all kinds had been utterly useless in throwing any light on the mysterious certificate. But the colonel of the Seventeenth Hussars was rather short of officers, and could not spare

his smart young major, who had no claim whatever to leave, having so recently arrived from England; besides, his particular motto was, "No leave," and as an Irish sub once angrily expressed it, "No leave, and as little of that as possible."

At last Sir Reginald reached Cheetapore, very much knocked up by the long journey, and a mere shadow of the man who had left it two years previously. The Twenty-ninth Dragoons, who had replaced his old regiment, hospitably took him in and "put him up." For two or three days he was prostrated by a recurrence of the fever, and fit for nothing. The first evening he was able to go out he went and called on the chaplain. He was not at home. Leaving a note to make an appointment, he went on to the band with one of his entertainers. As they drove round the circle, Miss Mason

—still Miss Mason—lolling back in her carriage, could scarcely believe her eyes, and Mrs. Chambers, her once firm ally and now implacable enemy, could hardly trust hers either. She said to one of the Twenty-ninth, who lounged up to her barouche: “Who is that in the dog-cart with Captain Fox? He looks frightfully ill.”

“Oh, that’s Fairfax of the Seventeenth Hussars. He has come down here on some mysterious errand or other. He would be much better on his way to Europe instead. Looks as if he was going off the hooks, doesn’t he ?”

“He looks very ill indeed. What on earth brings him here ?”

“Well, if you won’t repeat it, I’ll tell you,” coming closer and speaking confidentially. “Strictly private, you understand. Mum’s the word.”

"Oh, of course!"

"Well, I believe it's about a marriage certificate which someone posted home from here, and has caused the most frightful unpleasantness in his family. He has a wife in England, so you may fancy there was rather a scrimmage. He was only just married, and to a most awfully pretty girl too, when this particular missive dropped in. She left him at once, and he came out here with the Seventeenth. He has left no stone unturned to get the affair cleared up, but he has only managed to come down and see after it himself now—leave stopped. I fancy he will make it pretty hot for the forger if he finds him! It's ten years' penal servitude, is it not?"

"I am sure I don't know," replied the fair culprit faintly, looking very white.
"But oh! if she could only be the means

of getting Charlotte Mason transferred to Australia at Government expense ! How too delightful it would be ! ” ignoring her own little share in the transaction. “ Did you say that his wife had left him ? ” she asked, looking intently at Sir Reginald, whose dog-cart was drawn up close by.

“ So he told me.”

“ How ill and worn he looks,” she thought, gazing at him. “ Supposing he should die ! — he looked as if he had death in his face. If he did, she would never know a moment’s peace—never ! She would make full confession and trust to his mercy. He would not be hard upon her, it was not *her* fault ; it was Charlotte Mason’s scheme, and Charlotte ought to be shown up, unmasked, and transported.” Being a person who almost always acted on impulse, she beckoned to Captain Fox as soon as her former cavalier had sauntered

away, and asked him to tell Sir Reginald Fairfax that she wished to speak to him particularly. Much bewildered and with great reluctance he slowly followed the messenger to the carriage, where Mrs. Chambers, with a rather frightened white face, accosted him :

"I see you do not remember me, Captain Fairfax ? It quite shocks me to see you looking so ill."

He bowed and muttered inaudibly.

"Won't you get into my carriage for a little, and we can talk over old times ?" Seeing him hesitate, she bent over the side of the carriage and whispered in his ear : "It's about the certificate."

With an alacrity she was quite unprepared for from his languid and delicate appearance, he accepted her invitation and took a seat opposite her, and turning his clear dark eyes upon her, looked as if he would read her very soul.

Meanwhile Captain Fox sauntered off to join a promenading dandy, muttering to himself: "That Mrs. Chambers sticks at nothing; she is becoming faster and more foolish than ever! The idea of her tackling a strange fellow like that! I had no idea he was such an ass! A regular case of 'Walk into my parlour,'" said the spider to the fly."

"Sir Reginald," said the spider to the supposed fly, "I have something to tell you," and forthwith she unfolded her tale from beginning to end. When she came to the part where she mentioned it as a joke his eyes literally blazed, and he seemed with difficulty to refrain from some exclamation; but till she concluded he was perfectly silent. When she stopped to take breath after her hurried confession, he asked, with pardonable vehemence:

"What have I ever done to Miss Mason

or you that you should do me such a deadly injury? Do you know that the happiness of my life has been utterly destroyed by your ‘joke,’ as you are pleased to call it? I must say that your and Miss Mason’s reading of the word is very different to mine. The least you can do, and *shall* do,” he said, looking at her sternly, “will be to make out a written confession of everything, and send it up to my quarters (Captain Fox’s) to-morrow. I can hardly believe that you can have been the credulous tool you would appear. Good evening,” he said, springing out of the carriage and walking over towards that of her confederate, who had been watching the conference with the liveliest dismay.

“Miss Mason,” he exclaimed abruptly, perfectly heedless of two of Miss Mason’s satellites, who, with elbows on the carriage, and got-up with enormous care, had been

regaling the fair Charlotte with scraps the latest gossip — “Miss Mason,” he reiterated, “I know *all!*” There was an indignant tone in his voice and an angry light in his eyes that absolutely cowed *her* and astounded her companions. “You have forged an infamous lie, you have tampered with a church register, you have caused the greatest misery to a man who never wronged you, and to a girl whom you have never even seen! You are a forger,” he continued, almost choked between the two emotions which were struggling in his breast—joy and rage. “Unless by to-morrow morning you have made a full and explicit written statement of the whole affair, duly signed and witnessed, I shall submit the case to the cantonment magistrate, and you will be prepared to take the consequences. Penal servitude is what you deserve,” he added with bitter emphasis, as with a parting look

of unspeakable indignation he turned and made his way through the crowd.

His face was livid, his eyes burned like two coals. Captain Fox gazed at him in undisguised astonishment. "Jove!" he thought, "what a temper the fellow must have! He looks ready to jump down the throat of all Cheetapore this instant. He is not a man I should care to trifle with. The fair Chambers has evidently put him out, to say the least of it."

Sir Reginald hurriedly took him aside, and in as few words as possible told him the story; and then Captain Fox's face was a study. His indignation knew no bounds. His expressions in connection with Miss Mason's name were startlingly strong and vehement, and he laid the whip about his unlucky harness hack as if he had the fair culprit herself between the shafts.

Mrs. Chambers' "letter" arrived the following morning, and although somewhat more pressure had to be brought to bear on Miss Mason, her confession was received in due time. Both were enclosed to Mr. Mayhew, who was to read them and forward them to Monkswood.

"Now she will, she must give in," thought her husband. "In two months her letter will be out here, and in three, please goodness, I shall be in England."

It is hardly necessary to state that the whole story of the practical joke was all over Cheetapore in less than two days. Captain Fox was by no means reticent on the subject, which was soon known to all the Dragoons, and from them filtered to the cantonment in general. Sir Reginald was the object of universal sympathy, and interest was considerably augmented by the rumoured youth and beauty of his wife.

The whole incident had a romantic flavour about it that gratified the jaded palates of the Cheetapore *monde*, and it afforded them an universally interesting nine-days' wonder. As to Miss Mason, the place was literally too hot to hold her. She and her colleague were put into “Coventry” forthwith. Finding such a position unbearable, she took the earliest opportunity of leaving the station and going on a long visit “up country.” But wherever she went the story was whispered with various additions, *cela va sans dire*; and to the end of her life she will have good reason to regret her *practical joke*.

END OF VOL. I.



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